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# Designing Irishness: ethnicity, heritage, and imagined connection to place through language

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DESIGNING IRISHNESS: ETHNICITY, HERITAGE, AND IMAGINED  
CONNECTION TO PLACE THROUGH LANGUAGE

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Geography & Anthropology

by  
Thomas James Sullivan  
B.S., Montana State University, 1987  
M.A., The University of Montana, 1995  
May, 2010

For Ginny,  
Daniel, Mari and Mac  
and  
my father Daniel Patrick Sullivan

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## **Abstract**

In North America, those who are descended from “old world” immigrant groups—for example Germans, Greeks, Italians, Poles, and Irish—are thought to be assimilated or acculturated into the mainstream American culture. Since the late 1970s, however, sociologists have observed how a number of white ethnics, particularly those descended from third- and fourth-generation (and beyond) immigrants, continue to maintain a link to an ethnic group. This phenomenon—labeled symbolic or optional ethnicity—is now seen as a latter-stage development in the larger process of assimilation and ethnic-group identification. In this dissertation I show how the meaning of Irish identity has evolved in North America from a group of immigrants, to an ethnic community, and finally, a contemporary symbolic ethnicity which is positively influenced by commercialized forms of Irish culture, and is constructed from personal narratives and imagined geographies of Ireland. To study this phenomenon in more detail, this dissertation employs a multisited and autoethnographic qualitative study to focus on Irish-language enthusiasts at fifteen intensive Irish-language instructional events that took place at scattered sites in the U.S. and Canada. In this work I demonstrate how attendees at these events design, construct, and perform Irish identities for themselves by establishing parameters of what they perceive of as traditional and authentic Irishness, parameters that include ancestry, musical practice, dance, and most importantly language learning. Finally, I argue that the constructedness of their identities is part of the contemporary idea of diaspora—a concept developed by cultural theorists—that emphasizes how culture, identity, and place is a dynamic rather than static phenomenon.



## Chapter One: Introduction Designing an Irish Ethnicity

In November of 2006 I was staying at a summer camp in Jamison, Pennsylvania, located approximately thirty miles north of Philadelphia. I was there attending one of what amounted to fifteen Irish language immersion events that comprised my yearlong ethnographic dissertation fieldwork on Irish ethnicity in North America. Since immersion events involve a variety of activities—language class, dances, workshops, and music sessions—the camp was an ideal setting, for it consisted of dormitories, a cafeteria, classroom buildings, a main lodge, and a barn, each space utilized for certain aspects of the weekend-long event.

In general, organizers of immersion events create a comfortable atmosphere for learning, listening, and speaking the Irish language. Some events have over one-hundred participants, or enthusiasts, as was the case in Jamison, and therefore require multiple levels of teaching, in this case ten, based on an individual's fluency. Yet as this study will show, immersion events, whether a one-day, a weekend, or weeklong affair, are designed primarily for fostering interaction and socialization amongst those interested in cultivating their Irish identity through the Irish language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I interviewed approximately fifty language enthusiasts. Three to four were full-time residents and citizens of Ireland, who were attending a specific language event in order to teach the language and, four others were citizens of Ireland living in the U.S. on a part-time basis for work. The remaining forty-five enthusiasts consisted of five first-generation Irish-Americans, who left Ireland when they were young and became full-time residents and citizens of North America. Another six enthusiasts were

On the first evening at the Jamison event, I attended an informal social gathering following the introductory group meeting. While attempting to speak what little Irish I did know and understanding very little of what others were saying, I met two individuals, Michael and Finn, both fifty-something professionals, the former a stockbroker and the latter an accountant. Michael only recently began learning Irish, telling me he started about four to five years previously when Finn, an acquaintance from their mutual sports interests, convinced him to attend an Irish-language class being held at a nearby Philadelphia college.<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning, Michael knew of very little, if any, Irish ancestry in his family. Instead, he grew up Jewish in a working-class neighborhood of Glasgow, Scotland. “Probably three-quarters of my family [is] from Lithuania and the other one-quarter is from Ireland,” he reasoned, having only found out a few years prior that his great-grandmother was from County Clare in the West of Ireland. He was more familiar with his father’s side of the family and he had heard stories of his great-great-grandparents who “came over...when the Cossacks [were] persecuting the Jews” (Fieldnotes in tst 23).

After finishing secondary school in the early 1980s, Michael immediately immigrated to the US where he found work at a brokerage firm, married a woman

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second-generation—the first born in America to at least one Irish parent, and ten others were third-generation who had one grandparent who came from Ireland. The rest, me included, were beyond the third-generation, having some claim to Irish ancestry through great-grandparents or other distant connections.

<sup>2</sup> From this point forward, I tell a number of anecdotes, some of which are about me, while most others are narratives I constructed or interviews I conducted of event participants such as Michael and Finn. In order that these individuals remain anonymous I used pseudonyms to protect their identities.

who considered herself Irish American, fathered two children, and subsequently converted to Catholicism—in that order.

Finn, on the other hand, was born and raised in a Baltimore suburb. He described his upbringing as Irish, claiming his mother's grandmother was from Dublin—"all of her family was Irish and my father's mother was all-Irish, so...I'm three-quarters and a bit Irish." But his father's side was "mixed up," as his relatives came from France originally, where the English forced them to migrate to Acadia. Then, thrown out of Canada by the English again, they ended up in the Southeast U.S. where his great-grandfather married a Portuguese woman. "My grandfather ended up marrying an all-Irish girl. Then my father married an all-Irish girl, and then I married an all-Irish girl," he explained (Fieldnotes in gll pages 1-9).

Both sets of Finn's grandparents were American-born each eventually migrating to Baltimore by the 1920s. His mother was one-of-eighteen children from an Irish-Catholic family and they lived in an Irish neighborhood in the northern part of the city. Finn described his mother's family as "old Irish"—meaning that they had lived in Baltimore for a number of generations.

Michael talked about his grandmother who "was born Catholic, converted to Judaism and died Protestant." His mother had married a Jewish man, his father, and she was married for twenty years; together they had eight children before divorcing. She remarried shortly thereafter to his stepfather who was an Irish Catholic raised in Dublin. Michael and his siblings were born into the Jewish faith, he said, and he remembered that they all were bar mitzvahed (Fieldnotes in tst page 24).

Conversely, Finn grew up with seven brothers and sisters in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Baltimore that was half-Catholic and half-Protestant, and where “everybody knew who you were, one or the other, because of the schools you went to and the school I went to was Irish and Italian.” In his neighborhood, he explained, the Irish kids and Italian kids rarely intermixed: “I always sensed that the Italian kids could never quite understand where the Irish kids were coming from, because we always made fun of each other all day and all night. That’s what you did to kid around. And, I guess that’s not as acceptable, at least in the tradition of [the] Italian[s], so...there would be that rub. But, not...like it would have been with our parents’ generation” (Fieldnotes in gll page 9).

Although Michael and Finn came from mixed ancestries, grew up in ethnically-diverse neighborhoods, and practiced disparate religions, they came together by sharing a common goal—expressing their Irish identities through their use of the Irish language.

When I initially proposed my research project, I wanted to better understand why participants at language events, such as Michael and Finn, wished to learn Irish. My research questions included the following: How did their engagement with the language help them create or maintain an Irish ethnicity? What role did their perception of Irish heritage play in this process and how did they perceive Irish heritage? I was also curious to know if nationalism was a factor in the creation of their personal heritage. Further, I wanted to see how event enthusiasts envisioned place, in particular how they defined homeland? Why did they maintain a connection

to a place where they did not reside? And what caused them to create and maintain this link?

Throughout my multisited ethnographic study encompassing fifteen Irish-language immersion events throughout North America, I interviewed and observed dozens of individuals, transcribing thirty-seven semi-structured interviews. Nearly everyone who I met possessed mixed ancestries, yet chose to emphasize their Irish part. Michael and Finn's stories demonstrate a number of important points regarding ethnic identity.

What I found was that language-event participants practiced a form of ethnic choice—a highly symbolic and largely flexible way for an individual to stay connected to a perceived identity—constructed from a number of cultural practices and expressions—ancestry, religion, and language—that were used to symbolize their ethnicity. This dissertation explores how and why individuals, most of whom are many generations removed from their ancestors' immigrant experiences, construct and maintain a distinctive form of an Irish identity despite the persistent pressure of assimilation.

Additionally, this flexible and casual form of ethnicity stimulates a deeper exploration of the idea of diaspora, a term used by cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2000), that emphasizes hybrid identities and an individual's link to multiple home places. This notion challenges not only the static and linear concept of migration and assimilation, but also advocates the variability of paths and networks that individuals use to create their identities through imaginative geographies of place.

With the theme of ethnic identity providing the central focus of my study, I look to situate my work within the growing body of literature exploring contemporary ideas of identity and place. I find my study multi-disciplinary, encompassing works within anthropology, cultural studies, performance studies, sociology, and geography. I next briefly discuss the work of those scholars that best helped me to develop the theoretical framework for my dissertation.

### **Constructing an Ethnic Identity**

The notion of symbolic ethnicity and ethnic choice is an idea developed by sociologists who, working within and expanding on previous ideas of assimilation theory (Hiebert 2000a, 2000b), attempt to better understand why third- and fourth-generation Americans of mostly European ancestry continue to maintain a link to their ancestral roots. The term and concept of “symbolic ethnicity” was conceived of by the sociologist Herbert Gans (1979), and later expanded by sociologists Richard Alba (1990) and Mary Waters (1990), who reasoned that third-generation white Americans practiced a more flexible form of ethnicity than did their parents and grandparents. Gans writes that

...people of this generation continue to *perceive* themselves as ethnics, whether they define ethnicity in sacred or secular terms.... My hypothesis is that in this generation, people are less and less interested in their ethnic cultures and organizations—both sacred and secular—and are instead more concerned with maintaining their ethnic identity, with the feeling of being Jewish, or Italian, or Polish, and with finding ways of feeling and expressing that identity in suitable ways. By identity, I mean here simply the sociopsychological elements that accompany role behavior, and the ethnic role is today less of an ascriptive than a voluntary role that people assume alongside other roles. To be sure, ethnics are still identified as such by others, particularly on the basis of name, but the behavioral expectations that once went with identification by others have

declined sharply, so that ethnics have some choice about when and how to play ethnic roles. (1979, 7-8, his emphasis)

Waters (1990) in her empirical study of third-generation European immigrants in America adds to Gans' work by furthering his idea that ethnicity is a voluntary act. She proposes the idea of "ethnic options," writing that:

One constructs an ethnic identification using knowledge about ancestries in one's background. Such information generally comes from family members and/or some type of formal documentation, such as a family Bible or a will. This information is selectively used in the social construction of ethnic identification within the prevailing historical, structural, and personal constraints. Often people know that their ancestors are from many different backgrounds, yet for one reason or another they identify with only some, or in some cases none, of their ancestors. (19)

Waters (1990) found that Americans who possess multiple ethnicities through mixed marriage often choose one, from a tangled and convoluted array of personal ancestries. The reason for their choice is based on a number of factors. For example she found that for some, their choice of ethnicity changed over time, while for others, it was dependent on geographic location. Still some made a choice because one ethnicity was thought more appealing, accepted, or popular than another. In essence, she concludes that "[a]t various times and places, one is more or less at ease dropping or inventing a self-identification" (19).

The concept of symbolic ethnicity and ethnic options forms the foundation from which I further investigate how individuals use the Irish language to symbolize their Irish identities. Language is an expression of ethnicity that represents an individual's commitment to his or her Irish identity. The act of speaking Irish engages with ideas of performance which have more recently been introduced into a human geography "concerned to understand the construction of social identity,

social difference, and social power relations, and the way space might articulate all of these” (Gregson and Rose 2000, 434). A number of geographers embrace performance as a means of moving away from the analysis of texts and instead emphasize the mundane and habitual practices that make up our everyday lives (Lorimer 2005; Nash 2000).

Geographers first began incorporating the concept of performance into their work from ideas developed by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 1963) who uses the metaphor of theatre to explain everyday social interaction and role playing by individuals. Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose (2000) find that “[n]ot only did Goffman approach interaction through dramaturgical metaphor (stage, zoning, front and back regions, masquerade, and so on), but he saw interaction as an engagement between individual(s) and audience(s), to whom individuals perform and who, in turn, interpret their actions” (433; also see Richardson 1982).

Philip Crang (1994), and Linda McDowell and Gillian Court (1994), use a Goffmanesque approach in their research as a means for understanding how individuals perform a variety of social roles within work spaces. While Crang equates his experience as a waiter in a restaurant to a theatrical performance and the use of front- and backstage, McDowell and Court investigate gender relations in merchant banking and the variety of roles which they find are predetermined based on gender. They proclaim that there are a limited number of available “scripts” for women to follow in corporate management, that of the earth mother, pet, seductress and honorary man (236).



In addition to geographers embracing the ideas of Goffman, others look to the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler (1990) who insists that gender itself is “performative.” Her theory of performativity stresses both transgressivity and normativity where gender is produced through practices of everyday life that, over time, create an effect of identity. “Rather...performance—what individual subjects do, say, ‘act out’—is subsumed within, and must always be connected to, performativity, to the citational practices which reproduce and subvert discourse, and which at the same time enable and discipline subjects and their performances,” write Gregson and Rose (2000), who argue that performativity is a way to look at performance as a form of human action that is deeply embedded in an individual’s consciousness through their exposure to and constant repetition of historically embedded social and cultural activities (2000, 441; see also Pratt 2000, 2009a, 2009b; Thrift and Dewsbury 2000).

Geographers also attempt to understand the interaction between performativity and space. While Goffman depicts a stage which is produced for the acting out of specific performances, others such as Gregson and Rose (2000) imply that spaces are not necessarily “bounded stages” but instead should be thought of as “threatened, contaminated, stained, [and] enriched by other spaces. As are performers. So the kinds of performances which we are interested in here are those where the distinction between ‘actor’ and ‘audience’ is displaced...” (442). In Gregson’s study of car-boot sales (flea markets in England) she argues that rather than viewing them as fixed and pre-existing stages, it is the everyday consumer

practices and performances of the customers who give the spaces meaning (see also Edensor 2001).

The work of these geographers is important in two distinct ways regarding this dissertation. The first relates to sites of performance, and for language events these exist in a number of different spaces for short periods of time (chapter four). The second shows how language is seen by enthusiasts as the primary ingredient of their Irish identities, therefore I see enthusiasts performing their identities based on their performing language—in a Goffmanesque sense. Anthropologist Carol Trosset (1993) found that for those who speak Welsh in Wales, their use of the language makes them feel more Welsh than those who are not speakers. Similarly, I discuss how the performance of language is used by enthusiasts to define and ultimately compare themselves to the Irish in Ireland. Finally, I touch on how the repetition of perceived Irish traits in the form of stereotypes may align more with Butler's concept of performativity (chapter six).

Another primary attribute of identity construction is the production of personal narratives. In order to establish a connection to an Irish ethnicity, many language enthusiasts construct histories based on a perceived ancestry. Heritage was originally defined as "...a highly individualized notion of what we either personally inherit or bequeath (e.g. through family wills and legacies)" writes historical geographer Nuala Johnson (2005, 315). Contemporary research from geographers, according to Johnson, has expanded this definition by concentrating study of heritage in three ways—as an inauthentic history, a primary ingredient in tourism and consumptive practices, and an important ingredient in cultivating social memory. She

further emphasizes that geographers are “more concerned” now “with collective notions of heritage that link us as a group to a shared inheritance” (315).

Heritage as an “inauthentic history” is widely accepted amongst a host of geographers, as more of an invented concept rather than the meanings generated from words like “the past” and “history.” Geographers Brian Graham, G.J.

Ashworth, and J.E. Tunbridge (2000) explain the differences in this way:

The past, all that has ever happened, is not our direct concern: indeed the debate concerning the existence of the past as an objective reality is not a precondition for the creation of heritage. The attempts of successive presents to relate and explain selected aspects of a past is the concern of the historical disciplines, while the collection, preservation and documentation of the records and physical remains of the past is a task for archivists and antiquarians. If these concerns, however, focus upon the ways in which we use the past now, or upon the attempts of a present to project aspects of itself into an imagined future, then we are engaged with heritage. (2)

David Lowenthal (1998, see also 1985) reasons that “...heritage is not history at all; while it borrows from and enlivens historical study, heritage is not an inquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes”(x). He reasons that heritage can be produced by individuals, groups, or nations, and is easily manipulated for a number of purposes, whether economic, political, or cultural.

David Atkinson (2005) further surmises that heritage can possess multiple meanings depending on who is constructing it. As “[i]t follows that there is no single ‘heritage’ but, rather, plural *versions* of the past constructed in contemporary contexts,” he further suggests that “critical cultural geographers can help identify the partial versions of heritage that particular social groups require and produce” by

“explor[ing] how these heritages are materialized in space and place” (141, his emphasis).

A number of geographers study the multiple versions of how heritage is used to influence individuals or groups, primarily in the form of heritage sites (Johnson 1996, 1999), monuments (Johnson 1995; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Whelan 2001), memorials (Charlesworth 1994), museums (Till 1999), and landscapes (Johnson 1993; Nash 1993a, 1993b). Each of these studies show the variety of ways an invented history, or heritage, is used to promote a specific agenda, whether political—in the form of nationalism, economic—such as tourism, or social—in creating and maintaining an identity.

Individual and group identities require a heritage, as Stuart Hall (1990) asserts that “identity is a ‘production’ which is never complete” (222), further explaining that a cultural identity is

...not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (225)

In this sense, heritages are constructed to provide a sense of grounding or rootedness to place, as well as to maintain a sense of belonging for individuals or groups. Oftentimes, these heritages are embellished and manipulated, romanticized and selective, yet despite their dynamism they provide a powerful means for defining and constructing a cultural identity. In chapter seven, I explore how personal

heritages enhance individual ethnicities and demonstrate how heritage is constructed by language enthusiasts in order to ground and legitimize their ethnic identities.

### **The Idea of Diaspora**

Each chapter of this dissertation contributes in some way to an individual's understanding of the design and construction of an Irish ethnic identity and the overarching theme that holds together each of these components is the contemporary concept of diaspora. Stuart Hall (2000), as well as a number of geographers, cultural theorists, and anthropologists, challenges us to embrace the concept that culture, place, and identity are unbounded, dynamic, and mobile, rather than static and fixed. Through this perspective, the links between identity and place are constructed through a number of networks and consist of multiple places.

Originally,

[t]he term *diaspora* can, of course, be used in a “closed” way, to describe the attempt of peoples who have, for whatever reason, been dispersed from their “countries of origin”, but who maintain links with the past through preserving their traditions intact, and seeking eventually to return to the homeland—the true “home” of their culture—from which they have been separated. But there is another way of thinking about diasporas. “Diaspora” also refers to the scattering and dispersal of peoples who will *never* literally be able to return to the places from which they came; who have to make some kind of difficult “settlement” with the new, often oppressive, cultures with which they were forced into contact; and who have succeeded in remaking themselves and fashioning new kinds of cultural identity by, consciously or unconsciously, drawing on more than one cultural *repertoire*. (206, his emphasis)

This drawing upon multiple “repertoires” involves a redefining of the word itself. Cultural geographer Peter Jackson (2005) translates the meaning of diaspora in

the context of a noun and an adjective.<sup>3</sup> As a noun it means the “scattering of people from their original home...[or] the actual processes of dispersal and connection that produce any scattered, but still in some way identifiable population,” he writes, and as an adjective, it infers “the senses of home, belonging and cultural identity held by a dispersed population” (395; see also Jackson 2000). It is this latter definition which I find applicable to how and why language enthusiasts maintain their connection to their perceived ancestral home of Ireland.

Contemporary research by geographers and cultural theorists highlights this latter approach by studying transnational flows of migrants and multiethnic identities. Geographer Ann-Marie Fortier (2005) writes that “diaspora signifies a site where ‘new geographies of identity’ are negotiated across multiple terrains of belonging” (182), and geographer Claire Dwyer’s (2005) work with ethnic fashion, “sketch[es] out a way of thinking about geography that emphasizes connections, flows and networks” (500) when “[l]ess attention is being paid to models of migration which suggest that migration is theorized as a permanent move from one place to another” (496). These scholars wish for us to think about migration, and settlement in places other than the homeland, as less structured or static, instead promoting the multiple ways in which diaspora should be approached.

In reference to language enthusiasts, this is an important idea because of how Irish Americans, the Irish in Ireland, and other Irish scattered around the globe, each share and contribute attributes to Irish identities. Rather than a closed and essentialised notion of Irishness based in Ireland, being Irish is something

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson was greatly influenced by the work of Stuart Hall in his redefining of cultural geography in the 1980s (see Mitchell 2007).

constructed through a variety of networks and flows (I later show in chapter six, seven, and eight, how some enthusiasts recognize this process).

A more dynamic form of diaspora acts as a basis from which to study those populations that are far removed generationally from their ancestral home. In this dissertation I show how that applies to those in North America with mixed origins that, although they continue to maintain a powerful connection to their perceived home place over multiple generations, have come to create their own form of ethnic identity.

Hall (2000) explains how it is that ethnicity and place share a powerful bond through a perceived notion that long-term historical settlement in a specific area, intermarriage, and genealogical descent, provides a “*very* strong and *strongly* bounded idea of culture and cultural identity” (181, his emphasis). Yet he argues that a more contemporary way of thinking about ethnicity is needed that “breaks with a certain conception of *tradition*—the thing which is supposed to link us to our origins in culture, place and time” (207, his emphasis).

Besides Hall’s wish for us to think of our place of origin in less essentialist ways, literary and postcolonial theorist Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan (2003) further explores how different generations within the diaspora conceive of home place in multiple ways. He implies that it is wrong to authenticate one perspective over another. “The discovery of an ‘authentic’ India cannot rule over the reality of multiple perspectives,” he writes, and “[i]t would be foolish of me to expect that India will move my son [American-born] the same way it moves me. It would be equally outrageous of me to claim that somehow my India is more real than his; my

India is as much an invention or production as his. There is more than enough room for multiple versions of the same reality” (125).

This is indeed the case for language enthusiasts who occupy a number of generations and establish a connection to Ireland in a multiple number of ways regardless of how far removed they are generationally from the immigrant experience of their ancestors. Therefore, for some their attachment to an Irish ancestry and the place of Ireland relies less on experience and more on imaginative means, neither any less real for the individuals who hold them.

Connection to a home place is indeed necessary for those who consider themselves as part of a diaspora, as it is essential to their maintaining a distinct cultural identity. The concept of “imagined geographies” was developed by Palestinian-American cultural and literary critic Edward Said (1978) to describe how places—in his work the Orient or the Middle East—came to be endowed with particular attributes for those who had never visited or experienced them.

Said (2000) defines “imaginative geography” as “the invention and construction of a geographical space” for a number of purposes, in particular to promote and justify domination over another culture (181). He further explains how these notions are often reinforced through textual representations:

One of the strangest things for me to grasp is the powerful connection the locale [Middle East] must have had on European crusaders despite the enormous distance from the country. Scenes of the crucifixion and nativity, for instance, appear in European Renaissance paintings, as taking place in a sort of denatured Palestine, since none of the artists had ever seen the place. An idealized landscape gradually took shape that sustained the European imagination for hundreds of years. (180)



Said's defining of imagined geographies in the context of the Orient exposed how nations in the West achieved and maintained support from their populations in order to propagate hegemony, and how this was achieved through a variety of texts. Transferring Said's ideas of imagined geographies to the process of how Irish-language enthusiasts construct their Irish identities, I show how these individuals develop a powerful connection to Ireland through texts, as well as performances, despite their living in North America.

Whether reading history books, academic articles, or travel brochures, watching television or movies, researching family genealogy, or "surfing the web," textual representations of Ireland help enthusiasts to develop an attachment to place. Yet it is also their viewing of or participation in performances of Irish ethnicity that enhances their connection. Playing Irish traditional music, the act of researching family history through genealogy, listening to stories from ancestors, and learning the Irish language are but a few ways enthusiasts develop powerful ties to home place.

Geographer Catherine Nash (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005) explores how contemporary diasporic people—the Irish in North America in particular—construct and maintain a link to their perceived ancestral homeland of Ireland through genealogy and genetics. She reasons that although genealogy "...promises a neat and satisfying pre-given and predetermined collective identity—such as 'Irishness'—guaranteed by descent," that "[a]t the same time, however, it offers the potential pleasures of choosing an 'authentic' identity, in identifying, for example, with one surname, clan, or ethnicity amongst the range in a family tree..." therefore

“[g]enealogical identities are scientifically ‘proven’ in genetic testing and imaginatively reconstructed through stories and empirical evidence” (2002, 28).

Geographer Paul Basu (2005), who conducted a study of roots-tourism in Scotland exercised by those of Scottish descent in North America and elsewhere, investigates the process of “re-root[ing] an existentially homeless people in a landscape other than that in which they live their day-to-day lives” (125). Rather than “valorize this ‘essentialization’ of identity,” he instead looks at the rather non-politicized and passive act of visiting ancestral home places in hopes of exploring “the ways in which members of an ‘unsettled’ settler society succeed in *re-rooting*, themselves in—and *re-rooting* themselves to—what they regard as their ancestral homeland” (126, his emphasis).

The work of Nash and Basu shows the number of ways those in the diaspora link themselves to their perceived ancestral homes. Whether using what is thought to be a scientific means for doing so—genealogy and genetics—or through the practice of roots-tourism, which involves the visiting of those places perceived of as their ancestral home, diasporic individuals use a number of tools for establishing these links that are often modified in interesting ways.

In this dissertation I found that amongst language enthusiasts there exists a negotiation of sorts that is similar to that which occurs with those groups studied by Nash and Basu. While they maintain a static and sometimes essentialist notion of identity and place by constructing parameters of Irish culture that are tied to a perceived traditional and authentic Ireland, their identities are in practice, rather fluid

and dynamic based largely on choice. This contrast of “routes” versus “roots” is a common theme I emphasize throughout this dissertation.<sup>4</sup>

### **Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation describes how, and analyzes the reasons why individuals who are learning the Irish language construct an Irish ethnicity. In this work, I show how material needed to design this ethnicity is designed and built from at least a partial knowledge of ethnic history, performances that establish parameters of ethnicity in a variety of spaces—which can be influenced by popular culture—a personalized version of history, and an imagined connection to place. Each of the following chapters forms one of these components of ethnicity, which when combined, outlines the process of contemporary ethnic construction for Irish-language enthusiasts.

Beginning with chapter two, I provide an overview of my research methods. My fieldwork and subsequent analysis were qualitative and I employed a combination of both semi-structured and un-structured interviews, as well as participant observation at each Irish-language event. I begin by describing how my research resembled a carnival of sorts, as all the events were located in a variety of places and were comprised of a number of activities. Therefore I identify my fieldwork with those scholars advocating a “multi-sited” ethnography—a form of ethnography meant to follow along with a mobile population.

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase “roots versus routes” is used by a number of scholars in anthropology, cultural theory and geography. Throughout this dissertation I engage with the work of Paul Basu (2005), James Clifford (1997), Tim Cresswell (2004), Peter Jackson (1999, 2008), Paul Gilroy (1993), Stuart Hall (2000), and Catherine Nash (2002), among others, who explore this binary in depth.

Additionally, I was an active participant within my study and subsequently my research involved, at least partially, my personal experiences associated with learning the Irish language. It is this “autoethnographic” aspect that adds a reflexive element to my project. I conclude that these methodologies combine to form a unique and contemporary version of ethnography which is ideal for studying ephemeral events in a variety of locations.

Beginning with the next chapter, chapter three, I trace the history of Irish identity in America by focusing on those attributes that identified the Irish as different from others. Similar to other immigrants, the Irish were either thought to have assimilated or they largely remained unified and segregated. Eventually they evolved into an ethnic group—Irish Americans—but not until a community of American-born Irish formed that was periodically resupplied with newer immigrants from Ireland. In contemporary times Irish identities have become more personalized, voluntary, and individualistic, and therefore the meaning of what it means to be Irish has changed.

The construction of Irish-American identity over time is also reflected in the tasks and missions of voluntary organizations, societies, clubs and enthusiasms that formed as a result of a social, political, economic, or cultural needs during specific time periods. The goals of a number of organizations reflect the changing nature of Irish identity as members define parameters of belonging. Within the basic framework of Irish history, I include information on a number of these groups. In particular, I underscore those periods in history when a recognizable shift occurred in how Irish-American identities were perceived and conveyed, not just through the

missions and goals of organizations, but also through the work of academics, in particular sociologists, who, beginning in the first few decades of the twentieth-century began developing theories of assimilation, that at present, are still being developed.

In chapter four, I describe the spaces of the language event. In essence, each language event is a site for the performance of Irish identity. Some of these spaces can be viewed as stages where performances are induced based on the isolation and manipulation of each setting. Conversely, the site is made meaningful through the performances of the actors and audience—the language enthusiasts. I begin by looking at previous studies from geographers and others who research ephemeral events and how meanings are drawn out of the performances in these spaces. I then attempt to show how these “sites of performance” allow for event participants to interact in such a way as to create, reinforce, and maintain parameters for their Irish identities.

Chapter five focuses on the relationship between consumption and identity. Nearly all the enthusiasts I met acknowledged that Irish culture was fashionable, cool, trendy, and popular, attributing this phenomenon to the dance production *Riverdance*, as well as a reinvigorated traditional Irish music and dance. By engaging with the work of scholars working in the fields of history, media, and social and cultural geography, I illustrate how practices of consumption effect how these individuals act out their identities and how commercialization of Irish cultural expressions lead to questions of authenticity.

I begin chapter six by enlisting and expanding on those ideas from sociologists, anthropologists, performance theorists, and geographers who engage with symbolic and optional ethnicity, as well as performance, in showing how enthusiasts come to define parameters for their Irish identities. Most view their performance of the language as the ultimate expression and symbol of their Irish ethnicity, and in the process they unwittingly construct exclusionary guidelines of belonging. To conclude, I tie in these ideas to the dynamic idea of diaspora exposing a dualism of how enthusiasts construct group guidelines for inclusion while exercising a fluid and dynamic form of identity.

In chapter seven, I explore how language enthusiasts develop personal heritages in an effort to construct or reconstruct a past from which to build their Irish identities. I first engage with the work of historians, and cultural and historical geographers who emphasize the “invented” nature of heritage, using these studies as a way to better understand the process of individualized heritage production which for enthusiasts is largely a product of family narratives and personal experiences.

I next categorize the fifty-something enthusiasts—those individuals who contributed the most to my study—according to their generations removed from Ireland (first, second, third, and so forth), in hopes of recognizing similarities and differences in how they construct their personal histories. Further, I discover that despite how far removed an individual is from their ancestors’ migration experience and regardless of whether their history is based on personal experiences or reconstructed family narratives, the connection established is a means for authenticating their Irish identity.

In chapter eight I address how language enthusiasts construct the spatial aspects of their ethnicities. Drawing upon the contemporary work of geographers and cultural theorists, I explore the concept of diaspora in more detail and how enthusiasts are influenced by and construct visions of Ireland based on imaginative geographies. In constructing a link to Ireland as home they envision Ireland as containing a pure, native, or fixed and rooted culture. This “roots” vision is in direct contrast to the dynamic and mobile “routes” perspective advocated by many geographers.

Finally, I conclude in chapter nine with a brief summary of the previous chapters outlining how each represents a component of ethnic identity construction. Specifically, I emphasize the autoethnographic nature of my study, and through my own experiences I show how I construct my identity and connection to Ireland based on my, and other enthusiasts’, perceptions of tradition and authenticity. Last, through metaphors of mobility and dynamism, I argue that Irish-identity construction is a part of the contemporary idea of diaspora.

## Chapter Two: Methods Multisites and Self-Discovery

When my wife Ginny and I were walking the island of *Inis Mor* “Big Island”<sup>5</sup> off the coast of Galway one early evening in the summer of 1997, we stopped into a farmhouse someone recommended. It was actually a pub, sparsely populated with local clientele. I remember a handful of older men sitting at the bar, and a lone woman sitting at a table along the side of the house. The men were softly speaking in Irish with Irish language television buzzing in the background. At that instant, I was feeling both excluded and included at the same time; we were outsiders, because we were American tourists in an obviously “off the beaten track” place, yet insiders because after all I felt I was Irish, albeit four or five generations removed. This hole-in-the-wall pub occupied by Irish speakers made me feel proud of my heritage and generated feelings of being home, even though I was only there for a short time. Hearing real Irish spoken for the first time in an authentically Irish place made me wish I was a fluent speaker.

We eventually left the pub, walking the country road back to our Bed and Breakfast. Beautiful whitish rock walls lined each side of the road, which was remarkably visible in the dark, and the wind blew in our faces off of the nearby ocean. There was not a soul around for miles and I remember us commenting on how much this reminded us of my wife’s family ranch in central Montana. We also

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use italics to delineate words in the Irish language. At the first mention of the word in the text, I place the English meaning, but when I use the word following this first use, I do not put the English equivalent.



conversed about the simplicity of the pub, a place fulfilling the romanticized visions I had of western Ireland, quiet and local, with nothing but Irish being spoken.

These same feelings would continue on as we spent the remainder of our time there visiting the *Gaeltacht* “Irish-speaking areas,” buying Irish language books, talking to locals about the language, and familiarizing ourselves with the countryside. Upon returning home, I immediately began thinking about how best I could become fluent in Irish, which led to my organizing the first Irish-language-immersion weekend in Montana. This event spawned a renewed interest in Irish identity for many throughout the region as it set the foundation for the Montana Irish Festival, regular Irish traditional-music sessions, and Irish dance lessons and workshops. In the process, over a seven- or eight-year period, I unknowingly created the components for my future dissertation project.

Choosing the Irish-immersion event for my case study was at least partly based on my previous experience in organizing such events. I was an insider in the sense that I already knew a handful of language teachers both in the U.S. and Ireland, so once I explained to them my idea for the project, all were supportive, which in turn made my transition from organizer to researcher more comfortable. I chose who to study long before I knew where the research would fit within a geographic context. Yet I learned through my coursework that these ideas would begin to show themselves more prevalently once the fieldwork ended and the analysis and writing began. I trusted the process and therefore I initially focused on more pressing issues, such as the “how to gather data” phase of my research.

## My Research as *Green Eggs and Ham*

Say!  
I like green eggs and ham!  
I do! I like them, Sam-I-am!  
And I would eat them in a boat.  
And I would eat them with a goat...

And I will eat them in the rain.  
And in the dark. And on a train.  
And in a car. And in a tree.  
They are so good, so good, you see!

So I will eat them in a box.  
And I will eat them with a fox.  
And I will eat them in a house.  
And I will eat them with a mouse.  
And I will eat them here and there.  
Say! I will eat them ANYWHERE!

I do so like  
green eggs and ham!  
Thank you!  
Thank you,  
Sam-I-am!  
(Geisel 1960, 59–62)

Trying to put down in words my feelings of dislocation and insecurity that came to define my research, I immediately thought of Dr. Seuss' children's poem *Green eggs and ham*, not for the message of "don't knock it until you try it," intended for a young audience, but instead for how the characters are in a constant state of motion.

If I was to substitute "Irish language" for "green eggs and ham," and rather than "eating them," "researching it," the book-long poem portrays the multi-sitedness of my research, as well as the ephemeral nature of the activities that occurred at each site. The poem's running dialogue represents an entity in perpetual

motion.<sup>6</sup> I often felt myself in this position, flying and driving from place-to-place with regard to the location of my research population. I travelled from my base in Montana to places along the East Coast, West Coast, and Midwest, as well as a sojourn into Ontario, Canada and a number of places in Montana.

Initially, I felt compelled to observe everything, eventually realizing that trying to be everywhere at once made for an action packed and quite often exhaustive experience. I realized after the first few times out, that my research methods would have to match my travel schedule—fluid and “on-the-fly.” Interviews and observations literally took place while in motion—on boats, planes, and automobiles—while occupying a wide variety of spaces, including pubs, churches and classrooms.

Every research site contained an assortment of mini-sessions, each having potential in producing rich and diverse data. In any given day I might converse in Irish with my breakfast companions, sit in Irish class, participate in a dance workshop, walk with participants in the woods, observe a music workshop, attend Mass, play Irish trivial pursuit, and later have a beer with a friend at the pub while listening to a *seisiún* “music session”. Unlike most traditional ethnographic methods in geography and anthropology that focus on static places and the everyday, my fieldwork was much different, instead flowing in and out of places along with a mobile population, stopping only for a short period of time before moving on to the next site where yet another, very different activity was awaiting.

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<sup>6</sup> The passage quoted is the last verse of the poem.

In addition, I saw my research as a journey of self-exploration. I was the unnamed character sharing a seat next to Sam-I-Am, stubbornly trying to figure out my position as I visited site after site. When I began, I felt my role as more of a detective searching for clues as to why others were pursuing the Irish language. But following my first few interviews, I realized that I too was an integral component within my own study, and as such I began to recognize my contribution as a participant.

This autoethnographic perspective added a duality to my role as researcher. Not only was I a participant observer at each event, recording data and interviewing from the perspective of an academic, but I was also part of the study, continually expressing my feelings of isolation, triumph, and failure as I struggled not only to accurately record each event, but more importantly, actively participate in language acquisition along with all the others. It is my use of autoethnography, or a variant of it, that I believe adds an element of self-reflexivity to my research.

With regard to methods and methodology, I wish to elaborate on these two dominant themes—multisited ethnography and autoethnography—I show how both work together in greatly contributing to the theoretical foundation of my study.

### **Multisite Ethnography**

Within a three week period in the summer of 2006, I traveled from Butte, Montana to Milwaukee, on to New York City, Boston, then back to New York City, (the latter trip included a hair-raising Chinatown Bus trip)<sup>7</sup> soon to go back up the

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<sup>7</sup> The Chinatown Bus Lines is a bus company out of Chinatown in lower Manhattan where a bus leaves for Boston every hour at a cost of twenty-five dollars one-way. I

Hudson River to Esopus, New York, before heading back to Long Island and JFK, before flying back home to Montana. This research trip encompassed two large Irish festivals, two separate weeklong Irish language schools, Irish-society archival research at New York University and Boston College, as well as a number of pub sessions, subway and train rides, and intermittent stops at coffeehouses for typing in my handwritten notes into data files on my laptop.

In between the variety of events, I filled in space with a steady stream of interviews with all sorts of people related in some way to Irishness. I began to think of myself as a modern-day voyeur, or more likely a transient, living out of my suitcase and sleeping in rental cars, dorm rooms, on friend's apartment floors, and even a couch at a fraternity at M.I.T. By the end of this particular trip, when I was finally on a plane headed home, I was exhausted, wondering if I was retrieving and recording information properly and whether I should even continue on. At home, a recharging would occur, allowing much needed time to refocus, adjust and prepare for the next time out. This process would repeat itself over and over again throughout the year.

By definition, multisite studies come in multiple forms. According to Robert Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen (2007, 70-76) they are grouped into three types—modified analytic induction, the constant comparative method, and multi-sited ethnography. The first two are methods used to test a researcher's original theory from the data gathered at one site, and comparing it with those received at other sites “looking at similarities and differences in perspectives and situations” in the hopes of

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found it not only the most economical way to get from city to city, but also one of the more dangerous rides I have taken in a long while.

developing “an analysis and build theory,” while multi-site ethnography “moves away from ‘place-based notions of the field’” and instead, “explores how ways of making meaning connect people as they circulate ‘across time and space’” (76; citing K. D. Hall 2004). The process of deciphering meanings and how they travel, by studying a variety of sites, ushers in very different ways of conducting research compared to methods associated with traditional ethnography.

The theoretical foundation supporting an alternative form of anthropological research—labeled “multi-site ethnography”—began in the mid-1980s when a small group of anthropologists pushed for a modified approach in the study of world systems (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus 1986, 1995; Marcus and Fisher 1986). Their focus emphasized the shortcomings of fixed-site ethnographic research as a viable means for studying contemporary political, economic and cultural issues in a globalized world of networks and flows.

George Marcus and James Clifford continued forwarding multisite research well into the 1990s and beyond, and were later joined by a growing chorus of researchers in a number of varying disciplines each realizing the advantages, potential, and need for a contemporary form of ethnography (Marcus 1995; Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Hannerz 2003).

Multisite ethnography later surfaced in methods used by a number of anthropologists. Anthropologist Miles Richardson (2003) used this approach when comparing two very different religious practices, Catholicism and Baptism, in two very different places, Nueva Esperanza in Spanish America and Mt. Hope in the American South, when asking “Where is Christ?” and he further comments “on the

dual role of the field-working anthropologist as both a participant and an observer, an uneasy, slippery combination of sometimes incompatible components that makes the anthropologist always and everywhere out-of-place” (8-11).

The argument for legitimizing this contemporary form of ethnography remained mostly within anthropology however, as geography, according to Mike Crang (2005) has not suffered the “apocalyptic tones” with regard to ethnographic fieldwork as has anthropology based on our “plural practices of qualitative methods” and as such, our more recent use of the method has garnered less criticism (228).

In similar fashion, Ian Cook (2004) uses a multi-locale ethnography to trace the ways in which commodities, in his case study he uses the papaya, are produced and consumed in a global economy. His primary focus is to expose the disparity of wealth and disconnect between the grower, corporate buyer, and consumer of exotic fruit, in an attempt to answer the call for de-fetishizing commodities. In unique fashion, Cook uses personal interviews with individuals who occupy varying roles along the commodity chain in order to demonstrate how people attach meaning to the same object from different perspectives.

Mostly, multisite ethnography in geography is used as a tool for transcending spaces by looking beyond the study of fixed, local, and bounded sites and instead viewing, as Crang (2005) emphasizes, “places where global, national and local influences mix,” which could be anywhere and everywhere, where “ ‘...imported and domestic spirits infuse each other; all being signs of both the local and translocal, here and elsewhere, now and then, the concrete and the virtual’ until sites are ‘simultaneously planetary and, refracted through the shards of vernacular cultural

practices, profoundly parochial.” The primary advantage of this method is in providing a template for recording meanings associated with contemporary societies and cultures which today operate at an “awkward scale,” a scale which stretches beyond borders occupying a number of spaces at sometimes great distances (228; citing Comaroff and Comaroff 2003, 149, 151).

Disadvantages, outside of the larger philosophical arguments posed by anthropologists’ views of ethnography, can be both practical and methodological with regard to geographic studies.<sup>8</sup> Geographer Susan Freidberg (2001) finds that language, time, and access to be three issues that weighed down her multi-site study as compared with the choice of a single fixed site. The need for translators, the practicality or lack of adequate time to visit each site in depth, and difficulty in gaining access to various sites, combines to set limits on her research which in turn potentially complicated her results.

Crang (2005) looks less upon the practicalities of multisite ethnography and more towards whether the use of it can truly help us as researchers study the “new scales and topics” associated with today’s dynamic world. He wonders if multisite work is simply just the same research methods—say interviews and observations, combined together from a number of locations: “Perhaps paradoxically, qualitative methods in geography have often been locationally pluralistic but methodologically

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<sup>8</sup> In Harri Englund and James Leach’s (2000) article “Ethnography and the Meta-Narratives of Modernity,” they argue that reflexive fieldwork must be done long-term and in specific locales. Barbara Tedlock’s (2000) summary of ethnography in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln’s *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000) gives a brief summary of how ethnographic research has evolved from the traditional fixed-site approach to a multi-sited ethnography.



more uniform” (229). In other words, we need to be aware of what meanings we can ascertain from multisite ethnography that makes it diverse and unique.

### **Multisited Irishness**

My choice of a multisite study was necessary because Irish-immersion events are sporadic, ephemeral, and occur in different places. But not until I was well into my fieldwork and subsequently writing up this methods section, was I better able to understand the uniqueness, advantages, and meaning of multi-sited research.

In retrospect, I could have chosen a “fixed” site, say an Irish neighborhood or classroom of Irish speakers, where I might gather equally compelling, yet very different data. Instead, I became intrigued with the ephemeral nature and varied geographical locations that framed my study.<sup>9</sup> Although I knew that similar ethnic events such as parades, festivals, and workshops occur frequently at a number of locations throughout North America, I thought the nature of the language event as encompassing a group of dedicated individuals, many who I already knew, would provide an interesting and unique situation for an ethnic study.

Setting out into the field armed with these loosely defined goals provided for me a basic framework for my fieldwork. However, it was not until I returned from the field, coded the data, and re-reviewed the literature, that I discovered other, quite different methodological forces at work. The first thing I experienced was my difficulty in separating “the field” from my home. Not only did my fieldwork

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<sup>9</sup> In addition, and perhaps of equal importance, was my “insiderness” with regard to Irish-language events; I knew most event organizers (including myself), I was familiar with the activities associated with each event, and I also had previously visited a few of the locations.

encompass the numerous gatherings where I conducted the majority of interviews and observations, but also all the in-between-event encounters I experienced while traveling from place to place, as well as the solace found only at my home once I returned from the road (as well as the writing I am doing now).<sup>10</sup>

In reference to the illusion of separating home from the field, Karen Till (2001) finds that “[a] researcher cannot easily divide her research and personal selves into separate sites of home and the field” and as “we move back and forth between shifting homes and fields, our research agendas, relationships, and even our own understandings of ourselves as researchers will change because we can never know who we will become during the research process” (46). My fieldwork continued while sitting at home on my computer, keeping in contact with participants via email, organizing my own language weekends, and always reliving and retelling field experiences to myself and to others around me.

In this sense, the home was yet another “site,” from the multitude of others wherein I gathered and analyzed data, and, as such, I included “the home” on my list of multiple sites where I conducted research and wrote my “memos to self” with regard to my fieldwork experiences. Paul Cloke et al. (2004) recognized that a “...rethinking of what counts as ‘the field:’ where and when ‘it’ begins and ends, and

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<sup>10</sup> My research took me to a number of places over a one year period: the Butte, Montana festival and weekends (August 2006, February 2007, August 2007); Milwaukee, Wisconsin Irish week and festival (August 2006); Esopus, New York week and weekends (August/September 2006; February 2007; May 2007); San Francisco, California (September 2006); Helena, Montana (October 2006; October 2007); Jamison, Pennsylvania (November 2006); Saint Louis, Missouri (February 2007); Kingston, Ontario (April 2007); Missoula, Montana (February 2006; May 2007).

where and when researchers should consider themselves to be ‘on duty’ (or not) is an important aspect of fieldwork that human geographers need to consider when entering into their research study” (194).<sup>11</sup>

Regarding identities and ethnicities, sociologist Kathleen Hall (2004) argues for a “shift in ethnographic vantage point from an exclusive focus on everyday worlds to the broader historical and cultural processes in which these worlds are embedded” and as such, she finds that multisited ethnography is the best tool for viewing how immigrants “are made and make themselves citizens” (108, 109). In her study of Sikh ethnics in Britain, she emphasizes that most ethnographic studies in the past concerning assimilation focus on the “everyday worlds of immigrants” and the process of their becoming say British or American, yet today, ethnographers are literally shifting gears, realizing that in order to study the effects of globalization regarding these types of groups, it is necessary to look at place from a different perspective. This method departs from the traditional “place-based notion of the field” and instead advocates for a “circulation of discourse, the production of social imaginaries, and the forging of transnational networks across levels of scale and connecting people across time and space”(109; citing Marcus 1998; see also Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

My study is similar in that I am observing a community of Irish-language enthusiasts, most claiming Irish heritage and who either migrated directly from Ireland or came from a family of Irish immigrants. But unlike contemporary groups

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<sup>11</sup> Those writing about “postmodern” research methods find it difficult to separate the field and home into two very distinct places and instead argue that both are integrated. Besides Karen Till (2001) and Paul Cloke et al. (2004), see, for example, Karen McCarthy Brown (1991) and Kevin Archer (2001).

of immigrants to the U.S. and Canada, the Irish began migrating prior to our country's independence, and over the next three-hundred years, subsequent waves of Irish came and settled. Today, however, the ethnic enclaves in the form of urban neighborhoods are less visible as most of these individuals have long since intermarried or moved out to the suburbs, with only remnants existing in the form of say Irish pubs, church congregations, or Irish-language and music groups (see chapter three, where I expand on this history).

A more traditional placed-based study of an Irish neighborhood therefore is less plausible because these places are less likely to exist. Whereas many contemporary studies in sociology, anthropology, and geography indeed focus on problems of recent mobile populations who settle in more static ethnic enclaves,<sup>12</sup> today's Irish American community, I would argue, exists in a more abstract sense—widely dispersed, yet connected by less obvious spatial parameters. As such, and as Kathleen Hall (2004) mentions above, I instead wished to investigate the “production of social imaginaries” across “time and space” as I viewed language enthusiasts using language as a means for making new, or renewing old connections to their ancestral homeland, and while in the process building personal networks and joining communities which often do not exist in fixed space. Rather, these places are fleeting and ephemeral, communities of self-identified ethnics meeting only for a

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<sup>12</sup> A body of work from a number of geographers who are associated with the Ethnic Geography Specialty Group of the American Association of Geographers emphasizes fixed-site methods while investigating ethnic neighborhoods, settlement patterns, and the reconstruction of the material landscape in portraying ethnicity (see for example Hardwick and Meacham 2005; Nostrand and Estaville 2001; J.S. Smith 2002).

weekend in a secluded church, an afternoon in a tent at a festival, or perhaps a chatroom in cyberspace, each of which I felt warranted a multisite approach.

### **The Multisited Site or “Cultural Carnival”**

My research was not only located at multiple sites, but at each site there existed a variety of mini-events in multiple locations within the site—a multisited multiple site research study, if you will, or as I labeled them—“cultural carnivals.” From my perspective, each of these events offered a selection much like a booth or ride at a carnival, ephemeral in nature—lasting only a few days (or perhaps as long as one week), and once a participant was fully saturated, he or she could go home, recover and wait for next time. For most, these get-togethers likely seemed well-organized and easily navigated, offering a variety of choices for cultural enhancement. They could go to language class, participate in an Irish dance, song or a variety of musical-instrument workshops, attend a lecture on Irish history, and even combine music, dance and language at the evening *céilí* “social event”. Additionally, individuals could attend Catholic mass (spoken in the Irish language), play trivial pursuit games, go on nature walks, and even in one instance participants could learn hurling.<sup>13</sup>

But for me, the researcher, they were mostly chaotic, fragmented, and laden with difficult choices. What was I supposed to be looking for? What workshops should I go to? Which one was going to be most beneficial for my study? I reflected this conflict with entries in my fieldnotes, for example: “Oftentimes I become

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<sup>13</sup> Hurling is a traditional Celtic game played in Ireland. Each county in Ireland has a “county team” and it is one of the most watched sports in the country. It consists of wooden sticks, much like cricket, and a hard round ball, much like a baseball. It is typically played on a large field, similar in size to American Football (Wilcox 2006).

overwhelmed by the data, what to write down, who to talk to, and should I be here or there, taking down this or that and it was only after five or six events that I became accustomed to the pace of data recording, quite often finding myself making choices based on preference and experience as to which events would seem to yield the best data” (Fieldnotes in methods page 24).

Eventually, I became less-worried about missing out and instead focused on the activity I thought would be most interesting. In one instance I made a choice between a debate on Northern Irish politics and a whiskey tasting, choosing the latter based purely on instinct, thinking it would be fun, and in fact my being there led to a series of incredibly rich interviews. The nature of the language event as a series of mini-events sandwiched into a short time span warranted a style of fieldwork based on intuition and choices.

Beyond getting acquainted with doing research and knowing what to record and what not to, the larger issue rested with the set up of the study itself. Could I have better anticipated the craziness of it all beforehand? Had I known, would I have changed to a fixed-place approach? It was at home, away from the events, where I would have time to reflect on my research methods. It was there, after reviewing and typing up fieldnotes, where I eventually developed a strategy for attacking each field site. Following the first few events it became clear that a strategy was needed in order to maintain a semblance of order throughout the fifteen-event schedule. A number of things complicated the establishment of a routine, and it likely was not until the fifth or sixth event that I came to terms with how to gather resourceful data among the apparent disorder.

Among the multiple mini-events combining to form the agenda of the language event, the center or “core” activity was the Irish-language class. Initially the Irish classroom setting appeared benign, as we sat around in a room or hallway for one to three hours and conversed, read, and listened in Irish (and also English). But immediately I discovered the rich amount of data produced from these sessions. Mostly, I was able to learn about my classmates simply by sitting in class, listening to their life stories, family histories, political and religious affiliations, and their reasons for learning the language, although a fair amount was in Irish and could very well have been lost in translation.<sup>14</sup> My class notes contained observations and notes about language learners and teachers interspersed with Irish words, phrases, and grammar, later to be sorted out and separated in the coding process.

Outside of the classroom, I began to consider alternative forms of data gathering. Mostly, I could choose sites for observation where an activity was held, or, I could follow along with the population observing and recording data while on-the-move. Ultimately, I chose both, using a hybrid approach. Besides setting up standard interviews and observing static sites within each event, I used a modified “go-along” version of ethnography advocated by Margarethe Kusenbach (2003) who, in her sociological study of neighborhoods in Los Angeles, gathered data from mostly mobile informants engaged in their everyday practices of walking and driving.

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<sup>14</sup> Prior to my attending each language immersion event, I informed the organizer(s) of my researcher status and asked permission to interview and observe participants while I was there. In most instances organizers announced my presence at the orientation meeting so that everyone was made aware of my intentions from the beginning. At those occasions when a small number of language enthusiasts were in attendance, I made an announcement explaining my presence there as well as in smaller groups such as language class.

This approach worked wonderfully for me as I conducted interviews and observations of participants in a variety of places and sometimes in motion. Taking advantage of these various methods and settings proved valuable, as in many instances the one-on-oneness of the interview, coupled with the isolation of a particular setting, say driving in a vehicle, was comfortable and unassuming. In time I adjusted to this system, realizing the benefits of being flexible.<sup>15</sup>

An example of this type of study is geographer John Goss' (1993) study of the Mall of America in Minneapolis as a space from which he argues for a more dialectical perspective on popular consumerism. He conducted a series of observations and interviews with a diverse number of individuals. "...I visited every tenant, reading displays and promotional materials, shooting almost one thousand frames of slide film, and, if opportune, informally interviewing retail assistants and waiting staff. I met management and custodial staff, and chatted with shoppers, moviegoers, and flaneurs. And, of course, I shopped. . ." (47), he writes, having accomplished his fieldwork in ten days. Although Goss did not elaborate on the difficulty of his methods, I imagine it was exhausting to visit each and every store within the world's largest mall (over 500 establishments) while shopping, observing people, and interviewing.

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<sup>15</sup> A number of geographers have written on walking or movement with regard to methods and how it helps to give more reflexive meaning to things outside of what can be accomplished otherwise (see Edensor 2000; Lorimer 2003; Wylie 2005). The author Rebecca Solnit (2000) also wrote of the philosophical and historic importance of walking in her book *Wanderlust: a history of walking*, which adds valuable insight to the process of connecting a physical activity to mental thought processes.



Not unlike shopping at the mall, or observing or participating in parades or festivals, language events too contain widely diverse, numerable, and accelerated agendas. As I mentioned above, I became more relaxed in my gathering of information, eventually creating a template of sorts to guide my approach to each event prior to attending. But even while I came to feel more comfortable in my role as researcher, I continually struggled with my role as observer. As I wrote above, I was often confounded and sometimes panicked as I attempted to gather information, wondering if I was in the right place and writing down the correct things. Conversely, I was also a participant who, when not organizing my own language event, was able to go with the flow, choosing which activity I wished to attend as well as fully immersing myself in that activity. With this in mind, my fieldnotes revealed another aspect of my methods—autoethnography.

### **Autoethnography – Recording My Rite of Passage**

My first experience as a researcher at an immersion event was in Esopus, New York in 2005, and I remember it as being quite nerve wracking.<sup>16</sup> Although I was experienced in organizing my own language events and had been learning Irish on and off for approximately ten years, this was the first time I would be among a large number of fluent speakers, a few whom I knew from their attendance as teachers at my events. I remember nervously sitting down to breakfast in the lunchroom; the only seat available was across from two fluent speakers. I held my head down hoping no one would notice me.

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<sup>16</sup> This story was constructed and elaborated from notes I took on my first trip to Esopus, New York as an exploratory trip while developing my dissertation topic (Fieldnotes from Esopus, New York in February 2005).

Just thirty minutes earlier, I had awakened, startled, in the dormitory. The night prior I had gotten to bed around two a.m. after drinking beer with a group of five or six participants, all of us singing Irish songs and telling stories. Luckily I knew a few people from my past work in organizing weekends, so I didn't feel completely isolated, and mostly everyone spoke in English, so I understood most of what was going on. I recollect stumbling through the darkness of the dormitory, plopping myself down on my designated army cot and barely getting my clothes off before falling fast asleep under the covers.

Then it was morning. The sun shone through the large windows at one end of the large army barrack-like room, exposing perhaps forty empty, sloppily remade beds once full of snoring men. My watch showed seven a.m. "Holy shit," I whispered to myself, and jumped out of bed, grabbing my towel, soap and shampoo as I headed downstairs to the shower room, "...I thought breakfast isn't 'til 8. Where is everyone?" I said to myself. I quickly showered, brushed my teeth, dressed, ran back upstairs, hung my towel up, grabbed my Irish books, camera, and recorder, and then walked down the stairs, through the game room, past the chapel, down two immensely long hallways, towards the cafeteria. Passing no one in the process, I could hear the faint sound of hundreds of voices murmuring in the distance, and as I drew closer the whispers turned into a chorus of Irish.

Although I was familiar with the sound of the language, mostly from audio tapes and the classes I attended, this was to be the first time I would hear it spoken by so many in the same place. As I burst through the opening into the bright fluorescently lit room, I half-expected a sudden deaf silence as everyone stared at the

new, very late freshman. But I merited not even a glance from any of the one-hundred-plus individuals who were now mostly sitting down at the long tables, animatedly conversing while shoveling down pancakes, link sausages and gallons of cheap watered-down coffee. Why am I here? I can't speak Irish!

That prior evening at the orientation meeting, the event organizers stressed to all the participants, especially the beginners, the need to converse with as many Irish-speakers as possible and with all the Irish one could muster—regardless of one's level. Now, I unwittingly chose to sit and eat my breakfast directly across from one of the only people I knew, a fluent speaker, who in turn attracted a host of other fluent speakers.

“*Conas atá tú?*” one of them asked. My heart sank. I have heard this basic greeting—how are you?—hundreds, perhaps thousands of times. My response should have been: “*Go maith,*” or “good,” but I could not get it out. No matter how many tapes I had listened to, all the books I had studied, and all the people who I had confidently asked and for whom I had answered this exact question, I could not mutter a word. This was to be a long, tough road. Learning to converse in Irish was not going to be easy.

From the outset I felt that my research required a fair amount of risk. I suffered embarrassment, nervousness, bouts of dread, and loss of confidence. But I also sometimes felt satisfied, relieved and even euphoric as I did indeed progress. It was an Irish-immersion rite of passage. Throughout my one-year tenure of dissertation fieldwork, I witnessed some who made it—they worked hard and vastly improved—while others did not. Frustrated, they did not return. Still some, myself

included, occupied a space somewhere in-between—habitually returning and trying to improve.

I sometimes excused myself from all the emotional discord by stepping back, finding solace in the idea that I was simply a researcher disconnected from all the rest. This would provide for me a sense of stability amid the turbulence that I, and a majority of participants, experienced in this process of language immersion. Yet this downtime was short-lived. Most of the time, I occupied this liminal space of emotional struggle, fighting my way through the immersion process, often thinking that I just wanted Sunday to arrive when it would then be over. Thinking back, I never struggled with the jitters of a novice researcher wondering whether I was going to be accepted into the group, or if I was armed with enough questions to get through an interview. There was surprisingly little time for these thoughts.

Unlike confirmation in Catholicism, basketball tryouts, or ancient rituals of puberty, this passage into fluency seemed difficult to define. What was the end product? What did it mean to be fluent? Certainly there must be a point at which one becomes knowledgeable enough. By the end of my time in the field, I was more confident in my language ability and found myself less-intimidated by others, in some cases even initiating conversation rather than avoiding it. I didn't consider myself fluent, but at least I was more comfortable. Perhaps I had reached the end, my very own level of fluency? But as I think back now, it was the emotional investment I had built into my study, adding a level of credibility, reflexivity, and personality, which would have otherwise been missing had I not wished to be a speaker of Irish.

As my fieldwork progressed through the ensuing year, my role as researcher was in constant flux with my role as an active participant. Oftentimes, I was a participant observer, sitting in the corners of rooms, observing people and their activities and describing in my fieldbook the people, places and activities going on around me. I also conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews.<sup>17</sup> Some of these interviews would be quite formal. I would set up a specific time to meet, a quiet room to meet in, and once we sat down together, I would ask open-ended questions, documenting the conversation on my digital recorder. In most instances, however, my interviews would be much less formal, consisting of casual conversations while traveling in a car, observing a group dance, or sharing a pint in the pub.

Following these interactions, I would later write my recollection of our talk in my field notes when I returned to my dorm or motel room, or perhaps in a coffee shop the next morning if it had been a late night. These notes, made up of single words, half-sentences, full paragraphs, scribbles, and sometimes sketches, resembled descriptions of places and people, a wide variety of activities, conversations with others, and notes I took while sitting in Irish language class (including vocabulary and phrases in Irish). In addition, recalling my experience entering the cafeteria, I made it a point to record my personal thoughts through a running commentary or a series of “memos to self.”

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<sup>17</sup> In all, I recorded forty-one interviews, a large number of which were conducted in a quiet setting with an individual, although a few consisted of group interviews or gatherings in a more open setting.

These personal thoughts surfaced, frequently sandwiched between sentences of “thick description.”<sup>18</sup> Later, while categorizing my notes into “methods” (following my coding of the data), I noticed the framework of a diary, a personal narrative of sorts. And only after this diary emerged from the raw data did I begin to consider the possibilities and realize the potential benefits of this self-reflexive narrative—an autoethnography.<sup>19</sup> Although a good portion of my methods concentrate on the importance of multisite and ephemeral aspects of research, an equally compelling aspect involves reflexivity, and in my case this is expressed in an autoethnographic form.

### **What is Autoethnography?**

Contemporary human geographers, following the crisis of representation in the social sciences in the 1980s (see Clifford and Marcus 1986) and subsequent work by feminist geographers in the 1990s (see for example Rose 1993; England 1994; Staeheli and Lawson 1994), embraced a more self-reflexive approach to research, fieldwork, and writing within the social sciences, including geography, that “opened our eyes and ears to the necessity of exposing how the complex contingencies of

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<sup>18</sup> I reference here the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) when he writes of ethnographic work as a participant observer.

<sup>19</sup> The authors in Bogdan and Biklen (2007, 122-124) mention the use of personal notes as “observer comments” and “memos,” in order to generate a “therapeutic” benefit for the researcher. They further categorize these reflexive parts of fieldnotes into five groups: reflections on analysis, reflections on method, reflections on ethical dilemmas and conflicts, reflections on the observer’s frame of mind, and points of clarification. Additionally, they state that some researchers, particularly trained anthropologists, sometimes keep the descriptive and reflexive parts of their fieldnotes entirely separate—creating a personal diary (122). I unwittingly followed this procedure, except I did not consciously separate the two. Instead, the separation occurred only after the coding process revealed them.

race, class, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity are woven into the fabric of concrete, personal lived experiences, championing the cause of reflexive, experimental, autobiographical, and vulnerable texts” (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 735). The call for a more reflexive self-narrative study, or method, was labeled autoethnography and in a broad sense is used to describe the “studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural” (740).<sup>20</sup>

Combining the work of both Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997, 92) and Ellis and Bochner (2000, 740), autoethnography is categorized into five general themes: 1) native ethnographies—that type of research conducted by persons who previously were the subject of studies and later become researchers of their own groups; 2) complete-member researchers who “explore groups of which they already are members or in which, during the research process, they have become full members with complete identification and acceptance;” 3) ethnic autobiography which are narratives written by minorities or those considered to be in the periphery; 4) personal narratives written by those who use their own experiences in their writing and oftentimes “take on the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect of their experience in daily life” and; 5) autobiographical ethnography or literary autoethnographies that focus exclusively on the author as self, rather than as a social scientific researcher (see also Ellis 2004; Ellis and Bochner 1996).

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<sup>20</sup> Ellis and Bochner (2000) list dozens of different labels for autoethnographic work spanning many different applications, procedures, methodologies, and disciplines, yet the “term of choice” is autoethnography (739–740).

Importantly, autoethnography is significantly different than autobiography. The latter is an individual's personal history written by him- or herself, whereas the former engages the critical aspects of this personal history with the reflexive and self-critical approach of the ethnographer. In the beginning of sociologist Caroline Ellis' (1995) personal story *Final negotiations: a story of love, loss, and chronic illness*, she explains how the book is a "story within a story." While the "central narrative" describes her relationship with her partner through his chronic illness and death, the "framing story" comprises a critical analysis of her narrative throughout—"[t]he result is a multilayered, intertextual case study that integrates private and social experience and ties autobiographical to sociological writing" (3).<sup>21</sup>

While my study comprises, from the list above, a combination of a complete-member researcher and a personal narrative that negotiates a joining of academic researcher and research subject, it is the writing of my personal narrative that I feel most enhances this work. Throughout this dissertation, I insert myself into my study amongst all the other participants, and because of my self-critical analysis of these experiences, I hope to be able to at least partly breakdown the separation and between observer and participant.

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<sup>21</sup> Geographers David Butz and Kathryn Besio (2009) write of autoethnography as being expressed in five ways—personal experience narrative, narrative ethnography, insider research, native ethnography, and subaltern autoethnography—, each a form of "self-narrative" that provides a link between "academic researcher" and "research subject" (1665, see Fig. 1). Wherein the "personal experience narrative" is primarily autobiographical, "narrative ethnography" includes the researcher as being amongst his or her study population as but one of many voices—"...here researcher's own lives, emotions and experiences are not their primary objects of study" (1666).



Defining autoethnography and constructing parameters and guidelines for the term was initially the work of sociologists and anthropologists. Within geography, however, autoethnography was present, albeit under different labels and used perhaps for other purposes. Gill Valentine (1998) explains that while “both sociology and anthropology have been marked by increased critical attention to biography and autobiographical forms of writing as both methodological sources and as ‘methodologies’ in themselves,” geography, in turn, focused more on “issues of self-reflexivity” which “have hinged less on questions of autobiographical writing and more on the significance of the researcher’s identity and position in the research process” (305).

This is the case in Dydia DeLyser’s (2001) research, centered on the ghost town of Bodie, California, where she considered herself an “insider,” a researcher who was embedded within her research community long before she began her study. Her work would likely qualify as an autoethnography as defined above, even though the word does not appear in her writing. In fact, the word autoethnography did not enter into the geographic literature until well after the millennium, and even now is only used to a limited extent, especially when compared to anthropology (see for example Ellis and Bochner 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Reed-Danahay 1997; Okely 1992).

More recent is geographer Pamela Moss’ (2001) edited text *Placing Autobiography in Geography*, which contains articles from a diverse group of human geographers who wrote stories concerning their own personal experiences with discrimination, academia, research, and fieldwork. In the introduction, Moss insisted

that geographers must push beyond using autobiography as merely a means for data collection and analysis and instead look to a much more self-critical analysis:

“Struggling to survive the devastating political effects of identity politics, it seems appropriate to turn our attention toward the construction of “I” rather than toward the perpetuation of the falsely constructed omniscient ‘eye’” (9).

Her proclamation obviously found an audience for the post-colonial work of Butz and Besio (2004), who proposed an “autoethnographic sensibility” which looked to analyze how their colonial subjects presented themselves to their researchers. Butz and Besio argued for an autoethnography that went beyond that which focused mostly on “self-reflexivity” and instead emphasized that of which the “other,” in this case their research subjects, perform (353).<sup>22</sup>

Finally, Mike Crang, in a series of articles outlining the future of qualitative methods in human geography (2003, 2005), emphasized the importance of autoethnography for the future of geographic methods. His mention of the word shows the willingness for geographers to continually explore new ways to conduct fieldwork, improve research methods, and emphasize reflexive writing techniques.

### **Autoethnography and the Language Event**

How autoethnography plays a role in my research is twofold. First, and similar to DeLyster, I entered the field as an insider. I felt I easily fit in at most events because I was either familiar with a number of people attending or I knew the event organizer, which, in turn, made it easier for observing and interviewing. My insider role began in Montana where I first organized language immersion events. It was

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<sup>22</sup> See also Besio and Butz (2004); Butz and Besio (2009); Besio (2005).

there where I began nurturing what are now strong, and potentially lifelong relationships with others who are equally, if not more engaged in the language.

Additionally, my recruitment of language teachers to the Montana events from *Daltaí na Gaelige* “Students of Irish” in New York, as well from other places, forged strong bonds with others around the country, and therefore when attending their language immersion weeks and weekends, I became quite comfortable, feeling much like I was visiting with old friends. Sometimes I felt quite at home as I became more familiar with people, places, and routines associated with “the field,” as I wrote: “I walked up to the dorm with my bags and to the same bed I always take,” and on another occasion I recollected that during Mass, “I shook Patricia’s hand who was behind me and then Barbara gave me a kiss. I feel pretty much at home with these people anymore” (Fieldnotes in methods page 110-116).

Second, I was, and I still am, a novice language learner. Therefore, as an active participant in language learning, I suffered the embarrassment that came from my failures, as well as basked in the euphoria of my successes. My experience as an active participant became a journey of self-discovery as I progressed through my research. Often, I was clearly uncomfortable, hoping desperately not to be called upon to answer questions, searching for the nearest exit and sometimes feeling that I disappointed others who perhaps expected more from me. On one occasion I wrote: “They asked us some basic questions in Irish. I goofed up not really understanding. I was very nervous and intimidated, especially in front of Finn, who I thought would think I had more Irish” and “...then [I would] get frustrated and feel quite inferior to

them, intimidated to speak in Irish because I sense that they are tired of correcting me” (Fieldnotes in methods pages 39-51).

Other times I was progressing, and others witnessed this: “She was, however, impressed with my improvement in the language. She said she noticed I am much more willing to converse, and that is a good sign” (Fieldnotes from methods page 70). Yet, I continually critiqued my performance and focused more often than not on my shortcomings: “My limited vocabulary has become a hindrance, and as a result, I choose not to talk at all anymore in Irish. As [I run] out of vocabulary and things to say in the language, I become more depressed and find myself retreating or avoiding others and situations where I might encounter people”(Fieldnotes in methods page 37).

Anthropologists Anne Meneley and Donna Young (2005) stressed that: “Auto-ethnography is challenging because it requires those that are already embedded in particular cultural and social processes to subject themselves and their most intimate surroundings to the same forms of critical analysis as they would any other”(2). Therefore, one must open up to self-criticism. I believe that this turn inward, a critical introspection, adds credibility to my study regarding positionality and reflexivity. But additionally, I understand that as I can easily record in my fieldnotes the fluctuation in my emotional state regarding language learning, I question whether I am separating myself out from the others in my study. I envision an ideal autoethnography as one where a blurred line exists between being a participant and a researcher, and I think, in my case, this is difficult to attain. However, I do think that my being careful to emphasize that this condition exists,

and my realization that my study may not be wholly ethnographic, is a step in the right direction.

### **Combining Multisite Ethnography and Autoethnography**

Ian Cook's (2001) story of his rather unorthodox dissertation experience—beginning as a research project on commodity chains and ending as an autoethnographic study concerning power relations within his own geography department—is a combination of two seemingly disparate research methods. What I learned from his story was how two very different modes of research, multi-sited ethnography and autoethnography, can be combined by seeing the researcher as providing the link between the two.

Cook (2001) concluded from his research project "...that my 'emergent object of study'—the only 'thing' that connected the multiple locales of my research—was 'me' (whoever and whatever that might be), so I could say that writing your 'self' through the 'expanded field' of your work can be justified 'academically' as a way of writing reflexive, multilocale ethnography"(104). He continued by asking: "Aren't we supposed to see and make connections between people and the worlds they inhabit? Between spaces and times? Between everyday life and larger social/cultural/economic/political/et cetera processes? Between travels, translations, and transculturations? Between theory and practice? Between plenty more? Across all those categorizations, boundaries, and borders? In complex ways? And couldn't autobiography be a useful way of doing this?" (119).

Perhaps I too provide the connection between these various sites. My continual travel back and forth from home, from event to event, on planes, cars, and

subways, all the while recording my feelings and experiences and writing myself into my own research project, combined both multisitedness and autoethnography. And indeed as Cloke et al. (2004) remind us: “First encounters in traditionally ascribed fields—neatly bounded and out there—are by no means the only ones that make a difference to research findings. Ethnographic and other research always takes place in an expanded field, where researchers inhabit and move between a number of different locales, people and frames of meaning, and their work inevitably involves complex translations of meaning between all these settings” (194).

In one sense, the methods I used to conduct research were perhaps slightly unorthodox, not considered traditionally ethnographic, but instead I would argue they are practical, tailored perfectly for my project. I continue in the following chapters investigating how this word tradition, as well as others such as real and authentic, are used as a means for creating and maintaining language enthusiasts Irish identities. However, it is the variability used in how they go about designing their identity that favors a fluid and dynamic approach. How ethnicity became optional for Irish in America is the subject of the next chapter, where I show how the meaning of Irish identity evolved in America over time.

### Chapter Three: Immigrants to Ethnicity- A History of Irish Identity in America

Eleanor and I sat on a picnic table outside the Marist Brothers monastery building near Esopus, New York, where we were attending the *Daltaí na Gaeilge* “Students of Irish” Immersion Week. It was August of 2006, and the weather was warm and humid despite the location of this facility on the west bank of the Hudson River.<sup>23</sup>

The day before, I had met her in language class, where she mentioned to me that her parents were from Ireland and that she had grown up in the 1930s in an Irish neighborhood of New York City. I was further interested because she had also mentioned that her mother was an Irish speaker, and I had yet to meet a language enthusiast who was directly exposed to the language while growing up in America.

Eleanor was in her late-seventies, single, and lived north of New York City in the suburb of Yonkers. I first asked her about her parents, and she began by describing her father:

“I’m a narrowback.” She said.

“What is that?” I asked.

“The first generation...if you have two Irish-born parents you’re a narrowback,” explained Eleanor.

“Okay,” I said.

“My father used to say that. He saw his father break stones in the field [in Ireland] and when he came here [New York City] to work, he didn’t have the

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<sup>23</sup> *Daltaí na Gaeilge* is an organization founded in 1981 for the specific purpose of teaching the Irish language. I further describe this organization later in this chapter as many of the immersion events I attended were sponsored by *Daltaí*.

strength that his father had.... So the kids born here had narrower backs than their fathers,” she further explained (Fieldnotes in jom 1, 2).

Eleanor was second-generation Irish, or first-generation American, born and raised in the south Bronx in the 1930s near present-day Yankee Stadium. While growing up there, the neighborhood was mostly Irish, a lot of Italians, and some Germans. “No one in that neighborhood was from America in those days, and most of us were first-generation,” she recalled, and “in New York, you knew where someone was from by which Parish they belonged to: You’d say: ‘Where do you live?’ ‘Oh I live in Saint Angeles. And the response would be: ‘Oh I’m across the way in Sacred Heart.’ ‘Oh, I live way up in Saint Francis of Rome” (Fieldnotes in jom page 3).

Her father was born in 1899 in County Cork and her mother in 1903 in County Mayo. They’d both immigrated after the Civil War in Ireland in the 1920s. “My parents met at a Cork Society dance.” Eleanor explained. In New York the county societies held dances each week, “but they were on Thursday’s because all the Irish women in ‘the City’ worked as maids, and Thursday was the only day they got off work each week.” Nearly all counties had clubs in New York which were known as P and B associations—patriotic and benevolent societies—dedicated to promoting and preserving the cause of particular counties by supporting traditional sports teams and holding social events<sup>24</sup> (Fieldnotes in jom page 3).

In those days, the 1930s and 1940s, most everyone in the neighborhood was poor, Eleanor told me, but many were intent on sending their children to private

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<sup>24</sup> Historians Larry McCarthy (2006) and John Ridge (1997) explain the formation, purpose, and importance of the county societies in New York City as hubs of social activity for many Irish immigrants.



Catholic school. Her father worked in the shipyards, first on boxcars then as a shipping clerk. He was a member of the Teamsters' union, and if not for the unions, she explained, no one would have had a day off. She remembered that it wasn't until the 1940s and early 1950s that the union workers began to receive two weeks of vacation time each year, a practice never before heard of in America. It became a tradition for union workers to spend their time off by first repainting the family apartment—the landlord would pay for the paint—and once completed, the rest of the time was spent with the family (Fieldnotes in jom page 6).

Eleanor said that her father loved being Irish. “He was a great dancer in Ireland and a wonderful storyteller,” and she thinks this is where she got her love of Ireland. But her mother was an introvert who stayed at home. “She was ambivalent toward Ireland,” Eleanor told me, even though she was born and raised there. “Many Irish at the time had a stigma about being associated with the poor Famine Irish—‘What did [being]Irish ever give me?’—I remembered her saying. But at the same time, whenever we had guests over, she would insist I sing for them her favorite Irish songs” (Fieldnotes in jom page 6).

She also recalled her mother being an Irish speaker: “I know that when I was a young child, I heard her speak Irish at wakes. I'd hear her speaking Irish, her and her cousins.” Eleanor figured she had lost her language because she had no one to talk to. “I knew my grandmother and grandfather on my mother's side were native Irish speakers” and so knowing this “inspired me to learn Irish,” she said, telling me that when she enrolled in college, a local private Catholic school in New Rochelle,

New York, that she hunted down Irish language books in the library (Fieldnotes in jom page 6, 7).

Attending private Catholic schools throughout her childhood and up through graduate school, Eleanor graduated and became an educator and social worker, a career she loved and which spanned over forty years. Many of her friends similarly attended Catholic high schools and colleges, eventually graduating and entering into the job market. “New York University graduate school was a breeze compared to my undergraduate work at the College of New Rochelle,” she explained, emphasizing the high quality of education she received throughout her life (Fieldnotes in jom page 9).

Her leaving for college in the early 1950s not only allowed for her to succeed professionally, but additionally she moved out of her childhood immigrant neighborhood, which, by the time she graduated high school, was becoming less Irish, Italian, and German, and more Black and Puerto Rican. In the late 1950s, Eleanor was living north of the Bronx in Yonkers, and her parents too had moved further north into a nearby suburb near other Irish from the old neighborhood.

Throughout the next few decades, Eleanor was committed full-time to her career, and rarely visited the south Bronx, except to attend the annual Saint Patrick’s Day parade. Because of her mother’s connection with the language, she was interested in learning it and began with books, on one occasion even attempting to organize a course at her high school, but it was difficult to sustain an interest. She did, however, remain committed to her Catholic faith, as most of her spare time was spent volunteering for the Church (Fieldnotes in jom page 6). It was not until the

early-1980s, when in her early-fifties, that Eleanor decided to spend more time learning the language, even attending the first of many *Daltaí na Gaelige* immersion events. Additionally, she began taking trips to Ireland every two or three years where she visited her relatives and occasionally enrolled in Irish-language summer school.

By 2000 Eleanor was retired. She now felt that she would have more spare time to pursue her ambitions and the most important of these was becoming a fluent speaker of Irish. “This is the goal of my life, my gift for myself” she explained to me, “[my] learning Irish is not a destination, it is a journey.” In essence, Eleanor chose the Irish language as a way to symbolize her Irish identity (Fieldnotes in jom pages 10, 11).

Encompassing a ninety-year period in the history of Irish America—from her parent’s immigration from Ireland in the 1920s until our conversation in 2006—Eleanor’s narrative illustrates the changing nature of what it meant to be Irish in the twentieth-century. Based on prevailing social, political, economic, and cultural processes that helped shape and define the identity of the Irish immigrant in America over time, Eleanor’s story shows a number of transitions that occurred in the construction, development, and maintenance of her Irish identity.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a condensed history of the Irish in America from the pre-Colonial period up through to the present in order to demonstrate how the meaning of Irish identity has changed over time. I show how those of Irish descent transitioned from mostly an excluded and isolated immigrant group, developing into an established ethnicity that was perceived of as assimilated,

and finally entering into a period of ethnic pluralism and an individualized notion of optional ethnicity.

In providing an overview of this history, I use three different groups of sources. First, I consult the work of a number of historians who specialize in varying aspects of Irish America in piecing together a linear framework that emphasizes a generalized Irish identity. Next, and also through the scholarship of historians, I focus on the reasons for and missions of a select number of Irish-American organizations, societies, and enthusiasms that appear most influential in helping to shape Irish identities. Finally, I integrate the work of sociologists into this history. Beginning in the 1920s, studies of ethnic immigrants in urban enclaves initiated theories and models of assimilation. Conflicting arguments regarding these ideas still exist in academia with regard to white ethnics, as well as other, newer immigrant groups migrating to North America. The contemporary idea of symbolic or optional ethnicity and the often ambiguous meaning of assimilation, and diaspora for that matter, are underlying themes of this dissertation.

This chapter is organized in a chronological fashion beginning in pre-colonial, colonial, and pre-Famine times, up through the Great Famine and the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present.

### **The Colonial and Pre-Famine Period**

The Irish were amongst some of the first European migrants to come to North America. Irish American historian Timothy Meagher (2005) writes that “[t]he first Irishman came to America in 1584 as part of Sir Walter Raleigh’s ill-fated expedition to the Outer Banks of North Carolina” (3), and those Irish who followed

thereafter were mostly Presbyterians, or Scotch-Irish from Scotland coming to America via the north of Ireland. Of the forty million or more who claim Irish ancestry on the latest U.S. censuses, most are descendants of these Irish. Generally speaking, historians who study the Irish in America paid less attention to these migrants, perhaps because they were overshadowed by the large number of later immigrants from the Famine that began in the first few decades of the nineteenth century (Miller 1985; Meagher 2005).

Although Scots Presbyterians constituted a small minority in Ireland they came in large numbers to the American Colonies prior to the Revolution—perhaps 70,000 to 150,000 in the 18<sup>th</sup> century alone. Initially labeled as “Irish” by the other colonists, they preferred to be called “northern dissenters” as to distinguish themselves as Scots. Yet they occupied a social class in Ireland somewhere in-between the subordinate Catholic Irish, and the ruling Protestant English (Griffin 2001).

When these emigrants came to America in search of land ownership, which they were largely denied in the north of Ireland, they bypassed the major cities and instead settled on the American frontier. “Poor and mobile, they scratched a precarious existence out of the woods beyond the reach of the law and polite society” writes historian Patrick Griffin (2001, 3), and following their participation in the Revolutionary War, when they joined forces on both the British and American sides, these Irish came to be known as “the people with no name” because of their melting into the general population of that time (Griffin 2001; also see Leyburn 1989; Meagher 2005; Webb 2005; Doyle 2006a).

During the colonial period, organizations such as the Charitable Irish Society of Boston (1737) and the Ancient and Most Benevolent Order of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick (1784) in New York and Philadelphia, were created by Protestant and Presbyterian elites for the purpose of providing money, food and shelter for poorer Irish immigrants. The organizations later accepted Catholic members, providing an example of religious tolerance during this period (Funchion 1983).

Following the failed coup of the United Irishmen in Ireland, when revolutionaries attempted to overthrow the British in Dublin, as well as a number of other locations (the Irish Rebellion of 1798), a number of the leaders of the failed coup fled Ireland and settled in America. Some of these individuals later formed branches of the Society of United Irishmen in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. This society symbolized a group of immigrants unifying for political and nationalistic reasons rather than for religious ones (O'Grady 1973; Funchion 1983; Meagher 2005).

However, between the American Revolution and the Great Famine of the 1840s, and prompted by the end of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe in 1815, the composition of the Irish emigrant to North America changed dramatically. Due to a series of smaller potato blights and resultant famines, Irish migrants left their lands in the south and west of Ireland in droves, adding to those northern Presbyterians who continued to migrate, albeit in much smaller numbers. In general, these newer immigrants were rural, unskilled in factory work, diseased, malnourished, and above all, predominately Catholic (Miller 1985; Meagher 2005; Doyle 2006b; Lee 2006).

A number of notable Irish organizations and societies formed in response to the influx of these migrants. The Friends of Ireland for Catholic Emancipation (1825) was created in order to support Ireland's Catholic Association for religious freedom (the British eventually granted the emancipation of Catholics in Ireland in 1829), and the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) (1836) initially began as a charitable organization that restricted membership only to those "Roman Catholics of Irish birth and descent" (Funchion 1983, 50).<sup>25</sup>

From the Colonial period up through the mid-1800s, the primary mission of the members of Irish American organizations was charitable and nationalistic. This changed however, as the religious composition of Irish immigrants who came as a result of the Great Famine in Ireland (1845-1851) instituted a change in the goals and aspirations of Irish-American organizations. A large number of these immigrants were poor, diseased, illiterate, and Catholic—labels attached to the Irish in America by others that would come to define their ethnicity for the next century or more (Miller 1985; Meagher 2005; also see Ignatiev 1995, and Kenny 2006, concerning Irish racism and stereotypes).

### **The Famine Irish**

When Eleanor described her youth growing up with her Irish parents in the south Bronx, she mentioned how her mother mostly suppressed her Irish ethnicity because she did not wish to be identified as "Famine Irish," a label, she explained, that was given to those in her neighborhood who were poorer, destitute, and jobless,

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<sup>25</sup> The AOH evolved from groups in Ireland known as the Defenders, Ribbonmen, and the Whiteboys, each "secret agrarian societies [who] fought to protect the interest of Catholic peasants from the openly hostile Protestant establishment..." (Funchion 1983, 61; Ignatiev 1995).

and thought to resemble those who came to America during the Great Famine. Her recollection of hearing this designation nearly a century after the Famine to describe those who were less-fortunate showed how large an impact the Famine had on memories of those Irish in America, many of whom had migrated generations afterward.

Indeed, between the years 1780 and 1840, Ireland's population more than doubled as "...nowhere in the Western world 'in any half century, has the number of births so vastly exceeded the number of deaths as in Ireland before the Famine'" (Wiebe 2002, 21; quoting Connell 1950). The Famine began around 1845, and of the estimated population of 8.2 million living in Ireland in the early 1840s, approximately one million died and one and one-quarter million emigrated during the six-year period between 1845 and 1850. In Ireland, the total population further declined to 4.4 million by the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Woodham-Smith 1962; Foster 1989; Miller 1983; Meagher 2005; Reilly 2006).

At the receiving end of this mass migration was an American urban infrastructure unable to accommodate the large number of immigrants. Most settled in the cities of New England, the Middle Atlantic States, and the Midwest, where they worked menial-labor jobs, lived in unsanitary and densely populated neighborhoods, endured high mortality rates, and occupied prisons, sanitariums, and charitable facilities in high numbers (Wittke 1956; Miller 1985; Meagher 2005).

Additionally, a majority of these migrants were Irish speakers. By 1870, however, English had replaced Irish as the primary language used throughout most of Ireland. "The Irish language, strongest among those who had suffered most



severely,” writes historian Eileen Reilly (2006), “entered a period of decline that was intensified by continued emigration, a state education system that was hostile to it, and a growing popular attitude that characterized the language as backward”(95; also see Johnson 1997).<sup>26</sup> The language became a symbol of the Famine Irish that when spoken was a symbol of the rural, illiterate, and poor (Miller 1985).

Throughout the Famine years, Irish-American organizations focused on providing financial assistance, food, shelter, and protection for the poverty stricken and diseased who were coming from Ireland in staggering numbers. In 1848, Bishop William Quarter and several other Catholics formed the Hibernian Universal Benevolent Society in Chicago for the purpose of providing financial aid, protection from unscrupulous individuals, and valuable information for those heading towards the U.S. western frontier (Funchion 1983).

While many groups took on a benevolent role, others continued in a nationalistic vein stimulated by evidence that British colonial policy was responsible for the Famine. Secret organizations such as the Emmet Monument Society in New York, and a Boston branch, the Irish Emigrant Aid Society, came into existence in 1854 to lend support, primarily through fundraising, for an independent Ireland. By 1858 these groups dissolved, only to be resurrected into the Fenian Brotherhood, a branch of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) formed in Ireland. The Fenian

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<sup>26</sup> Miller (1985) estimates that one-fourth to one-third of all Famine emigrants, perhaps as many as half a million people, were Irish-speakers (see also Ignatiev 1995; Doyle 2006b). Besides settling in urban neighborhoods in New York City (Ridge 1991/1992) and Philadelphia (Callahan 1994), historians found the existence of Irish speakers in isolated places such as the Schuylkill mining valleys in Pennsylvania, Beaver Island in Lake Michigan, and the Mirimichi basin in New Brunswick (Kallen 1994).

organization became one of the most influential revolutionary groups in Irish and Irish-American history (Funchion 1983).

Voluntary organizations created during and after the Great Famine maintained charitable, benevolent, nationalist, and Gaelic agendas. Membership relied on a cohesiveness based on the immigrant experience which held a distinctly Catholic and anti-British flavor. While clinging to these attributes, the Irish remained segregated and isolated from mainstream, mostly Protestant American society.

Physical isolation took the form of the neighborhood parish—an Irish-Catholic enclave—where, in the words of historian David Doyle (2006b), the Irish immigrant group “salved its trauma and poverty and maintained its self-esteem and cohesion by constructing a peculiar subculture around the familiarities of the neighborhood, the saloon, and the parish” (215). The Irish had become urban dwellers, living in neighborhoods in the larger U.S. and Canadian cities where their affiliation with the Democratic party, membership in and control of labor unions, and occupying a large number of public-sector jobs helped construct a foundation that later acted as a springboard for their ascent up and into the middle class (Wittke 1956; Miller 1985; Meagher 2005; Lee 2006; Moynihan 2006; see Emmons 1990; Ignatiev 1995; and Kenny 2006 regarding Irish labor organizations).

In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Irish immigrants continued coming to North America in large numbers, primarily looking for work. When the American Civil War ended, and a period of economic prosperity followed, the newer Irish immigrants joined forces with the Famine Irish. In this process, newer Irish

American parameters developed that were founded on Irish nationalism and traditional Gaelic culture that were further enhanced by Catholicism (Meagher 2005).

A number of new Irish organizations came into existence during this time. The *Clan na Gael* “United Brotherhood” was created in 1867 as a radical nationalistic group that set up chapters or “camps” in major cities primarily as a means for fundraising and even participating in an Irish revolution if necessary. Also the Ancient Order of Hibernians, although founded decades earlier, shifted their agenda from a charitable focus to an “aggressively ethnocentric” group. The organization promoted Gaelic sports such as hurling and football, as well as the Irish language, while “pressuring local schools to teach Irish history, assailing demeaning stereotypes on the state, and sliding towards physical force nationalism” (Meagher 2005, 115; citing Miller 1985; also see Funchion 1983; Doyle 2006b).<sup>27</sup>

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which originated in Ireland, sent sports teams—hurling and football—to New York City as part of an exhibition in 1888. The trip proved catalyst for a run of teams in New York City that still exist, playing many of their games at Gaelic Park in the Bronx. Perhaps more important is the fact that these initial games lead to the creation of county societies—clubs that were integral to Irish social life in New York City throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nilsen 1996; Ridge 1997; Meagher 2005).

In the 1880s and the decades following, the Irish language was also taught in a number of places. Organizations such as the Philo-Celtic Society of Boston (1873)

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<sup>27</sup> In 1896, the AOH contributed fifty-thousand dollars for an endowed chair of Irish Studies at the Catholic University of America for the study of Gaelic literature, language and history (Funchion 1983, 57).

created a number of chapters in the larger eastern U.S. cities specifically for the purpose of preserving the language. A chapter was later formed in Brooklyn where members produced the first Irish-language publication in America, *The Gael*, from 1881 to 1904 (Funchion 1983). Additionally, in 1898, *Conradh na Gaeltige*, “Gaelic League,” and its influential leader Douglas Hyde came to America intent on fundraising and setting up chapters for the preservation of Gaelic culture, specifically for the Irish language (Funchion 1983; Ihde 1993; Meagher 2005; Reilly 2006).

Voluntary organizations continued to reinforce Irish nationalism and Gaelic culture in the waning years of the nineteenth century. Because the Irish remained an immigrant group, for the most part left outside of mainstream Protestant America, their link to the Catholic Church gained in stature and only grew stronger with time progressed. The distinction between the immigrant Irish and Catholics became difficult to ascertain as the two became synonymous with one another (Miller 1985; Reilly 2006).

### **Irish America in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Most Irish-American immigrants at the turn of the century still resided in urban enclaves. Miller (1983) explains that the concentration of the Irish in cities “gave them uniquely favorable opportunities to benefit from the enormous urbanization and industrial expansion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (493). By the 1920s, Meagher (2005) argues that, due to the fluctuating economy, an increase in immigrants coming from other countries, and the political and nationalistic turmoil in Ireland, the Irish began placing greater emphasis on their Catholic religion that increased the power of the Church.

In essence, a new Irish American identity became what Meagher (2005) labeled, a “militant American Catholicism.” Instead of choosing to appease the Protestants, the Irish, as well as a number of other Catholic immigrant groups, poured their resources into the “Catholic ghetto,” constructing “a parallel society that matched mainstream or Protestant society women’s club for women’s club and Boy Scout troop for Boy Scout troop.” The result was an unprecedented expansion in the Catholic infrastructure that included churches, parishes, and educational facilities (115, 116).

Organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, which formed in New Haven, Connecticut in 1882, symbolized the emphasis the Irish placed on the Catholic Church. Originally conceived of as a benevolent organization—helping the widows and children of deceased Catholic men—it evolved militantly as a Catholic defense organization, promoting American patriotism and supporting a multiethnic and wholly-Catholic agenda. Membership increased from a few thousand in the late 1800s to over 400,000 in the 1920s and to more than one-million by the 1950s (Funchion 1983; Meagher 2005).

During the 1920s, the urban lives of the Irish and a number of other urban-based immigrants became the focus of study by a group of sociologists from The Chicago School (Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago). William Thomas and Robert Park, among others, created “a new direction for American sociology” by concentrating their ethnographic work on “the dynamic between cultural retention among immigrants versus the pull to assimilate to American social mores” (Hiebert 2000a, 76; see Park 1914; 1928). These studies came along at a time

when immigrant Irish were beginning to move up the social and economic ladder and out of their urban enclaves and to the periphery of the major cities (Almeida 2006).

This was also the period of Eleanor's childhood and young adulthood in the south Bronx where she was raised amongst Irish and other immigrants. Eleanor's parents came to America to escape the Civil War in Ireland in the early to mid-1920s, settling in this enclave of New York City. Although she grew up poor, she said she had an enjoyable childhood and loved being Irish. She often talked about her commitment to Catholicism as it had been and continued to be an important part of her life. Not only did she identify herself as being from a specific "parish," but she was proud of her Catholic education that spanned from grade school through college. In essence, Eleanor's Irish immigrant childhood was not extractable from her religion.

Due to the "militancy" of the Irish and their allegiance to Catholicism throughout the 1920s and 1930s, assimilation into mainstream Protestant society was, for most, unattainable. However, as Eleanor's story demonstrates, the period following World War II when she entered college was a time of mobility—outward, as she moved out of the south Bronx and into the northern suburbs, and upward, as she began her successful transition into mainstream America.

By the 1940s and 1950s, urban ethnics were moving in greater numbers out into the outskirts of the cities. "Irish America was well on its way to transitioning from an immigrant to an ethnic community," writes historian Linda Dowling Almeida (2006), and by the second half of the twentieth century, they were "coming

to terms with their social and economic success and the migration out of the tight-knit urban communities to the anonymity and dispersion of the suburbs” (548). Her observation of the transition from immigrants to ethnics reflects how the Irish population was now predominantly American-born. Meagher (2005) further explains that after 1930, there were many more American-born Irish than Irish-born immigrants in the US, and by 1960, “[i]t was, then, the third and fourth generations, the demographic echoes of the famine flood, who made up the bulk of the Irish population now” (130).

In turn, Irish immigrants and those who were third- and fourth-generation Famine Irish became less interested in joining organizations such as the Gaelic League and the AOH. Membership in these groups dropped substantially beginning in the 1940s (Funchion 1983). By the 1950s and 1960s, New York City’s county societies, in which Eleanor’s parents met in the late 1920s, were also losing membership, forcing society leaders to relax restrictions to include not only native Irish, but also second- or third-generation (Ridge 1997; Meagher 2005).

Being an Irish American in the 1960s and 1970s meant something much different than in past decades. “Irish Americans, by any count, seemed to be making it in America by the middle years of the twentieth century. But what did ‘making it’ mean?” Meagher (2005) asks rhetorically, “[i]t did not seem to mean assimilation...” because “even as late as the 1950s...Irish Catholics were still more outsiders than insiders” (137).

Beginning in the 1960s, scholars began to aggressively challenge the concepts of assimilation still resonating out from the Chicago School. Nathan Glazer and

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's book, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), provides a powerful argument against assimilation theory based on their observation of ethnic groups in New York City. Their study, according to sociologist Mary Waters (1990), is "...a watershed event" instigating a "debate that raged for the next few decades over whether ethnicity would even disappear as a powerful political and social force in American life" (3).

Andrew Greeley (1971, 1976), a sociologist and priest, felt that members of the older immigrant groups—the Irish, Italians, Germans, and Poles, as well as the Jews—were not assimilated but instead possessed a pluralist identity maintaining both an American and a European identity (Abramson 1973; Novak 1973). These studies were a direct challenge to the ideas of the "melting pot" theorists who continued to support assimilation theory.

"Traditionally, Irish identity has been forged by three factors in Ireland and America: nationalism, Catholicism, and either language (in Ireland) or Democratic Party politics (in the United States)" writes Almeida (2006, 556), insisting that these ethnic identifiers were disappearing in the second half of the twentieth century due to the breakdown of the traditional neighborhood, the liberalizing of the Catholic Church with Vatican II, students leaving private schools, and socioeconomic success. A gap between the Irish and their Catholicism was widening (see I. Whelan 2006, concerning the relationship between Irish American ethnicity and religion).

Yet others felt differently, as Meagher (2005) reasons that the ethnic revival movement of the 1960s and 1970s prompted third- and fourth-generation Irish to "mobilize their own claims for respect" and "proclaim their own ethnic pride" (166),



as individuals began to look back to Ireland as a means for reconnection (see Waters 1990). Whatever the cause for a pluralist identity, the effect in the 1980s and 1990s morphed into an upwardly mobile, intermarried, middle class, third-generation white ethnic group that participated in what sociologist Gans (1979) called a “symbolic ethnicity.”

Gans’ (1979) modified version of assimilation held that “...ethnicity takes on an expressive rather than instrumental function in people’s lives, becoming more of a leisure-time activity and losing its relevance, say, to earning a living or regulating family life.” This perspective, he explains, is quite different from their parents or grandparents who resided in ethnic neighborhoods, living among fellow ethnics, and voting for ethnic politicians (8, 9; see also Alba 1990; Waters 1990).

The perception that Irish American ethnics participated in a cultural revival played out in the form of new organizations that came into existence at this time.<sup>28</sup> Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* “Musicians Association of Ireland,” originally founded in Ireland as a means for preserving Irish traditional music, instigated the formation of chapters in the U.S. The organization sponsored the All-Ireland *Fleadh Ceoil* “dance and song” competitions held each year in the U.S. and Ireland (Funchion 1983; Miller 1983; Ó hAllmhuráin 1998; Meagher 2005).

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<sup>28</sup> Although I discuss some of the newer organizations over the past twenty to thirty years as promoting a cultural focus, there were a large number of North Americans involved in fundraising and other more radical activities that advocated a Northern Ireland free of British rule. One of the more popular groups, NORAIID (Irish Northern Aid Committee), came into existence during the “Troubles” in the late 1960s and still maintains a nationalist agenda (Funchion 1983; see also the official website of NORAIID: <http://www.irishnorthernaid.com> (last accessed 7 November 2009).

An increase in those interested in learning the Irish language was gaining momentum during this time. The founding of *Daltaí na Gaeilge* in 1981 by Ethel Brogan, a native Irish speaker from Northern Ireland, was instrumental in providing venues for the learning of Irish in an immersion format. Originally teaching a few friends in her living room, Brogan expanded the organization to include the sponsorship of a number of annual language-immersion events in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Still other established organizations, such as *Conradh na Gaeilge* and branches of the Philo-Celtic Society, continued to sponsor language classes and immersion events in a number of places throughout the country.

The mission of today's contemporary groups and organizations reflects the changing nature of Irish ethnicity in North America. Language enthusiasts such as Eleanor now "choose" to stay connected to their Irish identities, both to symbolize to others a sign of their ethnicity as well as to fulfill a desire to remain rooted to their ancestral home place. In turn, their belonging to groups serves a different purpose than in the past. Gans (1979) writes that "ethnic identity is not a new or third generation phenomenon, for ethnics have always had an ethnic identity, but in the past it was largely taken for granted, since it was anchored to groups and roles, and was rarely a matter of choice" (8). He felt at that time that these groups were no longer needed. I, however, argue that these once nationalistic, religious, and political organizations or enthusiasms now serve a different need, more specific to those who wish to remain connected to a traditional, and, to them, authentic vision of Irish culture.

At the end of my interview with Eleanor, she described for me how, in her home, she had arranged photographs of her now-deceased mother and father on her bedroom table. She placed a stone from the farmland of each of her parents next their respective photographs, symbols reminding her of her Irish heritage and her ancestral link there. On top of her mother's picture sits her Silver *Fáinne* “ring”,<sup>29</sup> an award given to her by *Daltaí na Gaeilge* organizers for her hard work and commitment to the language. At the close of the interview, she confessed to me that she wanted to be a fluent speaker of Irish before she died (Fieldnotes in jom page 20-23).

Much like the symbols clustered on Eleanor's bedroom table—the rocks depicting a connection to the physical homeland of Ireland and the *Fáinne* symbolizing her use of the language as a means to connect her past to the present—Irish identities are today highly individualized and subjective, voluntary rather than mandatory, symbolic rather than practical. Yet enthusiasts still wish to maintain powerful connections to their ancestral past and home place.

The following chapters further explore how enthusiasts like Eleanor come to design, construct, and maintain their Irish identities. Prior to exploring how enthusiasts begin this process, I first look at the importance of the language event in providing a site for identity construction—a site of performance—where ideas of being Irish are produced and reinforced.

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<sup>29</sup> The Silver *Fáinne* is a badge awarded to those who show a particular level of fluency in Irish, or a strong commitment and desire to promote and learn the language. A Gold *Fáinne* is awarded to those who are judged to be fluent speakers (see *Foras na Gaeilge* “Irish Foundation”: <http://www.gaeilge.ie> (last accessed 5 October 2009)).

## Chapter Four: Ephemeral Irish Spaces Sites of Performance

While in Milwaukee for the Irish Fest Summer School and Festival, I stayed in a dormitory located on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus. Irish-language classes, as well as a number of other cultural events and workshops, were being held in a variety of classrooms there, so staying in the dorms was ideal. In addition, I was informed by fellow language students that there was a bar a few blocks to the west, located on the edge of the campus, where a *seisiún* would be occurring that evening (I would later find out that this happened every evening of that week), so I was happy that I could walk to and from the bar without much trouble.

It was Monday night, the day after I arrived, when I walked toward the pub. It was around ten o'clock. I waited, knowing from my nightlife experience in Ireland that the Irish begin their socializing late into the evening. As I drew closer, I heard traditional music wafting through the open air patio and out into the busy street that paralleled the campus. I entered through the crowded doorway and made my way to the bar, eventually cramming my body sideways between two patrons. The place was packed with people. I waited for eye contact from any one of the three engaged bartenders as I briefly surveyed the place.

It was a Sicilian bar and restaurant. There was a front atrium space that opened onto the sidewalk, a middle area dominated by the long bar where I now stood, and, in the rear, a restaurant area with tables. The walls were adorned with painted murals and black-and-white photographs depicting people either in southern

Italian or Milwaukee immigrant neighborhood life. It was as if the bar owner wished to convey his or her family story to us: one of Sicily, and the other of America.

I focused my attention to the left on the open-air porch where as many as ten musicians, all sitting in an oval, were playing an Irish reel. A wide variety of instruments were audible above the noise of the crowd; I heard fiddles, *bodhrán* “traditional Irish drum,” flute, tin whistle, banjo, concertina, and uilleann pipes, not all indigenous instruments of

Ireland, but rather common for music sessions I witnessed during my fieldwork.<sup>30</sup> I glanced to my right, back towards the rear of the building, where I spied a much larger group of musicians playing a jig for a contingent of *céili* dancers,



**Figure 1** Late night music *seisiún* and *céili* dancing at the Sicilian bar in Milwaukee (source: photography by author).

who colonized the center of the room since many of the tables were pushed to the perimeter, creating a makeshift dance floor. Spectators sat and stood around them, clapping while drinking beer and wine, all appearing to enjoy themselves immensely (Figure 1).

On this evening, as well as on every night of the Irish School and festival in Milwaukee when I visited this bar (which I did repeatedly), I sensed a transformation

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<sup>30</sup> In Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin’s (1998) *A Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music*, he claims that “[t]here is no iron-clad definition of Irish traditional music...,” rather “[i]t involves different types of singing, dancing and instrumental music developed by Irish people at home and abroad over the course of several centuries. Irish traditional music is essentially oral in character, and is transmitted from one generation to the next through a process of performance” (5, 6).

in the meaning of the place. The contrast between Sicily and Ireland was clearly visible, as if under the watchful eye of a large portrait of a middle-aged couple hanging on the back wall (in Figure 1 the portrait is visible in the background), a small-scale ethnic conversion took place.

Witnessing this process before me, I felt I that this space resembled the atmosphere of an authentic Irish pub—such as those I had visited in Ireland (see my related story in chapter two). Surrounded by the Irish music *seisiún*, the dance *céilí*, the Guinness, and a handful of patrons speaking the language, I was comfortable here; I felt as if I had just entered into a pub in the West of Ireland.

Late into the evening on my second full day in Milwaukee, I was invited to sit around a large table with perhaps as many as fifteen individuals at the same bar—an impromptu *seisiún*—when, for a period of two or more hours, nearly everyone sitting there contributed in some way by performing a form of Irish cultural expression. There was a Donegal fiddle tune, a harp player who strummed a song, storytelling of all sorts, and the singing of Irish nationalistic and drinking songs in both English and Irish. I did my best to mouth the words. One woman played her flute while the other played her concertina, followed by three All-Ireland champion<sup>31</sup> *sean nós* “old style” singers who sang their emotional songs that silenced nearly all the patrons in the bar (Fieldnotes in po pages 39, 40).

The atmosphere at the Sicilian bar those evenings in August was but one of many instances during my fieldwork in which spaces were converted, albeit for only

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<sup>31</sup> The All-Ireland traditional music, dance, song and language competition is held each year in Ireland and is sponsored by *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann*, an organization with branches in many countries around the world (in chapter three I briefly explained the history and agenda of this organization).

a short period of time, into Irish places—through the actions and performances of the individuals who occupied them. Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) encourages us to look at the relationship between space and place in such a way that “...if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (6). Indeed I felt as if a “pause” occurred at each site I visited; what initially seemed to me to be rather mundane spaces were either inadvertently or purposefully transformed into Irish places.

However, in order to understand how and why this transition from space into place occurs, and what message or meaning is meant to be conveyed to the participants involved in this transformation, a deeper interpretation, beyond Tuan’s humanistic approach to place, is needed. Paul Adams, Steven Hoelscher and Karen Till (2001) explain how geographers must “...try to unearth the many ways that place impinges on identities surrounding race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality” as in most cases, “...human creativity is hemmed in by large-scale social, political, and economic structures” (xix). In other words, we must attempt to unravel who is in control of the production of these spaces and for what reason they produce them.

So I begin my investigation by looking at how scholars, primarily geographers, study ephemeral events such as that which occurred at the Sicilian pub. Activities such as parades, pageants, pilgrimages, and festivals, produced from the actions and performances of individuals and groups, inevitably become sites of performance for political, economic, social, or cultural processes that promote specific agendas.

Next, I look at how organizers choose the spaces used to host language-immersion events. Each site exhibits specific features in order to promote and facilitate interaction and to enhance the immersion experience. Oftentimes, subtle physical modifications are made to the spaces—such as the hanging of an Irish flag or signs in the Irish language—in order to simulate an Irish place. Further, the intermixing of language class with numerous cultural activities, such as dancing and music, is a way to augment group cohesion and to foster conversational Irish. Some see these spaces as artificial *Gaeltachtaí* “Irish-speaking areas,” if only for a short period of time.

Finally, I explore a select number of activities I witnessed at language events for the purpose of deciphering the meaning and messages that were meant to be conveyed. I argue that these activities both expose enthusiasts to and reinforce parameters of Irishness that help in their building of an ethnic identity. Organizers create a stage where individuals both participate as actors and watch as audience members, for the purpose of promoting and maintaining specific parameters of Irish culture. I use as examples—Catholic mass, the dance *céilí* and music *seisiún*, and a variety of unique activities—events that were part of event itineraries intended not only to promote language use, but also to serve as a means to develop ideas for what constitutes an Irish identity. I conclude that these activities help enthusiasts in developing a perceived traditional or authentic notion of what it means for them to be Irish.

The language event is one way to promote group unity and to establish parameters of Irish identity within a short timeframe. In this chapter, I demonstrate



how ephemeral events, the spaces they occupy, and the performances that occur within them provide the material from which to develop an Irish identity.

### **The Meaning of Ephemeral Events**

Each language-immersion day, weekend, or week that I attended throughout my fieldwork temporarily occupied a space. These spaces where the language events were staged were designed for other purposes, such as schools, churches and motel rooms, yet from the onset of the immersion event, they became Irish places. I listened to music sessions in pubs, in school buildings, and in motel rooms, and participated in dance workshops and social get-togethers in offices, in cultural centers, and in a summer-camp lodge. I took communion during Mass in an outdoor park and had my fortune told at a Psychic Fair in a room of a Monastery, each a site of performance representative of some traditional form of Irish culture.

Spaces that play host to temporary events can be thought of as “sites of performance,” according to geographer Tim Edensor (2001). In his study of tourist attractions, he implies that spaces are purposefully constructed by those in power (tourist boards or state-run agencies) in order to dictate certain behavior or promote specific agendas.<sup>32</sup> He writes that tourist activities

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<sup>32</sup> Geographers have studied a number of ephemeral events—plays and pageants (Hoelscher 1998, 2003; Woods 1999; Ryan 2005), parades (Marston 1989, 2002; Jackson 1992; K. Moss 1995; Bonnemaïson 1997; Johnston 1997; Kong and Yeoh 1997; Busteed 2005; Vernois 2006), ethnic festivals (Cohen 1980, 1982; S. Smith 1993, 1995; Duffy 2005), art festivals (Waterman 1998; Quinn 2005a, 2005b), Carnival (Jackson 1988; Lewis and Pile 1996), flea markets (car boot sales) (Gregson and Rose 2000), folk concerts and pub sessions (Kneafsey 2002; Leonard 2005; Morton 2005; Revill 2005), Plazas and Markets (Richardson 1982), and even soccer games (Price and Whitworth 2004)—in hopes of uncovering their oftentimes hidden meaning and messages.

...are carried out upon particular stages—on beaches and mountains, in cities, heritage sites, museums and theme parks. These settings are distinguished by boundedness, whether physical or symbolic, and are often organized—or stage managed—to provide and sustain common-sense understandings about what activities should take place. Indeed the coherence of most tourist performances depends on their being performed in specific “theatres.” (63)

Edensor uses theatrical metaphors, such as stage, settings, stage-managed, performances, and theatres to show that these spaces are predetermined, bounded, and constructed for the purpose of transmitting explicit messages.

In his description of the Salzburg Festival in Austria, geographer Stanley Waterman (1998) explains how arts festivals are usually seen as “a[n] ubiquitous phenomenon in western culture,” when “...festivals transform landscape and place from being everyday settings into temporary environments—albeit with permanent identities—created by and for specific groups of people” (55). Arts festivals such as that in Salzburg often attract tourists through music and drama acts, but as Waterman suggests, these transient events are an integral means for cultural production, as he reasons that those in power, the “political and cultural élites,” use a stage or platform (the arts festival) for “...shaping norms of public discourse” (57). He is implying that not only do festivals instantly transform the meaning of spaces, but the activities comprising these types of events often act as a façade, hiding deeper cultural, social, economic, or political processes.

Access to or control of specific spaces at particular times gives those who are in power the means for dictating specific agendas. Sallie Marston (2002) shows, in her study of the New York City Saint Patrick’s Day parade, “...how different narrations of the Irish national community come together at this particular moment

in history to fragment identities and construct boundaries between people perceived to share a common cultural history” (374). She further explains that “...the cultural use of space is a political act that can routinely require adjudication if not the show of outright force by the state. Thus, in attempting to comprehend the cultural politics of difference, we must begin to come to grips with the ways in which the state enables or constrains the performance of identity particularly how the state understands and regulates the use of space in the constitution of cultural performance” (390).

Marston further explains how members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), an Irish fraternal organization that sponsors and organizes the parade, is able to dictate which groups and individuals are allowed to march in the parade. In particular, she recounts how the AOH has disallowed participation of gay and lesbian organizations, and she further emphasizes how those in power are able to influence, to a nationwide audience, what are acceptable or unacceptable parameters of Irish-American identity (see also Marston 1989).

Also concerning the New York City Saint Patrick’s Day parade, historian Ken Moss (1995) similarly argues that this event was, in the past, a way for those in power to project a specific form of ethnicity. He found that between the years 1860 and 1895, “...the [Irish] community needed to demonstrate both its cohesion as an ethnic community and its loyalty to the U.S. simultaneously” and “[i]t [the parade] provided a visible, public venue for the physical and symbolic enactment for Irish-American strength and cultural/national cohesion” (137).

Both of these examples show how the same event conveys different meanings and produces disparate messages based on the political, religious, and social current of a particular time period. According to Moss, the parade was a tool for those who were in power to reinforce and promote an Irish nationalist and Catholic agenda at the end of the nineteenth century, whereas Marston's interpretation of the more recent parade reflects the contemporary notion of an Irish American identity that does not include free expressions of sexuality.

Conversely, repetition is an integral component for those in power who, through the performance of annual or semiannual events, wish to reinforce the same message over time. Geographer Steve Hoelscher (2003) shows how the Natchez Pilgrimage in Mississippi, a multi-week event held in the fall and spring of each year and which includes home tours, a pageant, as well as a number of other activities, is an event used to subtly promote and reinforce components of racism. From his review of historical documents, Hoelscher discovered a continuum of racist practices portrayed through the performances of participants in the annual pageant. He shows how, under the guise of a public performance, the past is manipulated by those in power to represent and reinforce a racist agenda.

“It served to remind African Americans...of their proper, historical place as sharecroppers,” he writes, “while reassuring whites—both those from inside the community and those drawn from outside its borders—that such a station in life was not only natural but also romantic and even desirable” (660). His research shows how these types of events can be used as powerful tools for producing identities through ritualistic and habitual performances over time.

While these examples look at the spaces of events as more or less a fixed and bounded stage on which an event is performed, others look at these spaces as being produced by the performances acted upon them. Geographer Nicky Gregson (Gregson and Rose 2000; also see Gregson and Crewe 1997, 2003) explores how places become meaningful through the actions of the individuals who occupy the spaces. She uses as an example the car boot sale, a daylong flea market or rummage sale, where people come together to buy and sell used goods. Gregson and Gillian Rose (2000) insist that these spaces are “‘stages’ [that] do not preexist their performances, waiting in some sense to be mapped out by performances; rather, specific performances bring these spaces into being” (441, used also in the introduction).

Edensor (2001) too addresses this idea, arguing that spaces, in his case a variety of tourist sites, are made meaningful by the performances of the participants whose actions override and create different meaning from that intended by those who construct the space. He suggests that “...the organization, materiality and aesthetic and sensual qualities of tourist space influence—but do not determine—the kinds of performances that tourists undertake” (63), rather “...the nature of the stage is dependent on the kinds of performance enacted upon it. For carefully stage-managed spaces may be transformed by the presence of tourists who adhere to different norms,” he further writes, telling us that “...stages can continually change, can expand and contract” as “...most stages are ambiguous, sites for different performances” (64). According to Gregson and Rose, and Edensor, the meaning and

messages produced from the performances and interactions of the participants are what make spaces into meaningful places.

I next look at how the spaces for the language event are constructed. These places serve both practical and symbolic purposes. Although I discuss the former, it is the latter that I accentuate, as it is the representative nature of the event and the activities and performances within that play a vital role in how individuals develop parameters for their Irish identities.

### **Sites for the Performance of Irish Culture**

Language enthusiasts attended events not only for the purpose of learning or enhancing their language skills, but also to be with others who share a common interest in their Irish ancestry and Irish culture in general. Organizers designed their events with these goals in mind by incorporating a number of activities that facilitated conversation and provided opportunities for group interaction and cohesion.

Irish-language class was the focal point of each language event I attended. Yet learning how to converse in a social-type setting was equally as important, as well as was the diversity of the activities that made up each event. Donald, a language enthusiast from California, explained to me why he liked the events:

...[T]he things that make the weekend really nice too, is the music, the history of the culture, poetry or whatever...just, you know you get a cultural feel for what it...is to be Irish or whatever. And, I think that that's the thing that the [event organizer] brings [with] those immersion weekends is just...the language is obviously...more hours are spent on the language but there's this break and you get a little history of Irish mythology..., *Cú Chulainn* (Irish mythology figure), or something like that. Then there's the music and you learn some dance steps and stuff like that and it's just a...great mix of stuff rather than just one thing. I think if it were just any one of those that it could

become stale. Whereas when it's a mixture of those it seems to work really well. (Fieldnotes in nrc page 29)

Indeed many organizers produced a number of activities outside of the classroom in order to provide opportunities for conversation amongst participants. Additionally, a number of these mini-events were used to introduce enthusiasts to a variety of other Irish cultural expressions besides language and, as Donald said, to “get a cultural feel for what it...is to be Irish.”

But prior to exploring how these events are intended to make an individual feel Irish, the space where the event is held must satisfy certain physical parameters. The Marist Brothers Monastery in Esopus, New York, for example, is located on an old estate perched



**Figure 2** Marist Brothers Monastery in Esopus, New York (source: photograph by author).

above the Hudson River about two hours north of Queens, New York. “I walked around the Marist complex and took pictures. I wanted to capture the isolation of the place,” I wrote in my fieldnotes, “it is nearly like a fortress with stone walls around the front part of the monastery, and grass and tree areas surround most of the main building.... A perfect sanctuary coveted by most event organizers, as it provides a unique space that allowed for an atmosphere of learning” (Figure 2) (Fieldnotes in po page 98).

Isolation was a key component for the event and therefore the search for an isolated space was a priority for organizers. Each site had to satisfy a minimum of

criteria. It was best if the place consisted of a number of rooms for classes, a large main room for the dance *céilí* and music *seisiún*, a dining room or cafeteria, and sleeping quarters. An organizer I met in Milwaukee, when assigned the task of finding a place to hold an immersion weekend, told me: “We wanted to do something [here in Milwaukee] and we had the same problem we’re having now...finding a place that was the right size and the right cost that would let us do what we wanted and...the area where we are is too pricey so we just started going from place to place and...we ended up [in southeastern Wisconsin]” (Fieldnotes in places page 79).

The space for the language event was purposefully set apart and isolated from the English-speaking world, both literally and figuratively. A space with privacy was practical in that it allowed all the participants to engage closely with others who were learning the language, and if possible, a one-shop-stop space was best, where the enthusiast could eat, sleep, drink and socialize under one roof. Since the intent of most organizers was to stimulate group cohesion and interaction, having one space for multi-day events that included mealtimes and sleeping quarters was beneficial.

Symbolically, the isolated space was meant to emulate an Irish *Gaeltacht*. An effort amongst organizers to modify these spaces—hanging Irish flags or signs in the Irish language—was a subtle way to create an atmosphere of an Irish place. At nearly every event I attended, the presence of signs in the Irish language was visible. The labeling of rooms, notices of that particular day’s itinerary, or announcements of the evening’s dance *céilí* or music *seisiún* provided slates for displaying the language. In some rooms, Irish-language posters were hung that included illustrations and



photographs depicting Irish vocabulary, or common greetings and phrases.

Inevitably, an Irish flag—either the national flag of Ireland (a tricolor with green, white, and orange stripes) or the unofficial flag with the golden Celtic harp on a green background—was hung, generally in the main hall where most of the meetings occurred.



**Figure 3** *Is Fearr Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste* “Broken Irish is better than perfect English” (source: photography by author).

The boundary between the Anglicized world outside and the Gaelic space inside was similarly demarcated, as for example in Esopus, where a sign taped to one of the doors leading outside onto a common area proclaimed: *Is Fearr*

*Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste* “Broken Irish is better than perfect English”

(Figure 3), telling the participant how much better it is to be amongst Irish speakers than English speakers, even if one knows only a bit of Irish.

At some sites, the atmosphere was made to feel Irish in more creative ways. While attending a language event in Saint Louis, the participants and I smelled a strange aroma coming from the fireplace as we sat in the loft area during one of our language classes. Someone had added peat to the fire and it was smoking up the place. The intent was to give the space a feel of a cozy cottage in Ireland, rather different from that of the large log cabin located in the woods outside of Saint Louis. I guessed one of the participants wanted to give the space a smell of Ireland (Fieldnotes in places page 67).

Indeed, the space of the event can be seen as a bounded stage that is sealed off and manipulated in subtle ways in order to symbolically enhance the experience of the participant. Anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), in her book *Destination Culture*, describes how museums, festivals, and heritage sites, act “as a surrogate for travel,” by “[e]xhibiting artifacts from far and wide,” where “...museums have attempted from an early date to reconstruct the places from which these things were brought. The habitat group, period room, and re-created village bring a site otherwise removed in space or time to the visitor” (132). The language event is comprised of artifacts such as flags and signs, as well as activities and performances that are similarly used to reconstruct an Irish place.

Enthusiasts rarely spoke directly of the spaces where the event was being held. Timothy, a language teacher from Ireland who lived sporadically in the U.S., was an exception, as he described to me his first immersion-weekend experience in Esopus:

... [I]f you look at the signs, every sign in English has...almost been replaced by an Irish-language sign or bilingual sign and there is always an effort to hermetically seal this area and to reconstitute it as an Irish-speaking capsule for this weekend only and it's by common consent—it's a collective decision...collectively acted out...[pause] ...[an] effort to re-invent this building as if it was in Ireland. The ironic part is [if] you were...anywhere in Ireland or anywhere in an Irish *Gaeltacht* this day you wouldn't find a linguistically pure area which is being attempted here. (Fieldnotes in places page 4, 5)

Timothy described the space as an “Irish-speaking capsule,” a collaboration involving all the participants. He also mentioned how this type of space would not exist in Ireland because, as I will further elaborate in chapter eight, the *Gaeltachtaí* are places where not everyone who lives within the borders actually speaks the language.

The space of the language event is therefore an imitation of what a *Gaeltacht* is perceived to be—an ideal Irish-speaking space. When thought of in this way, it is not as important that the space is manipulated in an attempt to emulate an Irish space; instead, what is pertinent is the messages and meanings created from the collective effort of the participants inside in their making it an Irish place.

Beyond the general isolation of the space and the collective effort on the part of all the students, teachers, and organizers to create an Irish-like place, each language-immersion event consisted of an agenda comprised of a number of mini-events, or cultural activities, such as language class, workshops in music and dance, presentations, meals, a *céilí*, Catholic Mass, or a music *seisiún*. These activities were held in a variety of spaces such as chapels, classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, atriums, and common rooms, in spaces peripheral to the main site at pubs, or in tents at festivals.

A number of stages were constructed for the purpose of prompting Irish cultural performances, or, as Timothy described above, the spaces were made into Irish-like places through a collective effort and performances of the participants. I next investigate the reasons for and meanings generated from these activities, arguing that the spaces of the language event act as a stage where attributes for Irish identity are constructed.

### **Stages for Creating Parameters of Irishness**

For beginners in the language, the primary reason for attending an immersion event was to participate in conversational Irish. A larger number of others—those who regularly attended these events—came to converse but also to

reconnect with friends and meet new people. In many ways, the language was the means for the larger process of community building, as these events brought together individuals of all ages and economic status, of mixed ancestries and talents, each sharing an interest in Irish culture.

Barbara, a woman in her sixties who grew up in an Irish enclave in the north Bronx, told me that she fell in love with the language after taking a class in New York City. In her childhood, she was partly raised by her Irish-born grandmother who made her take Irish dance, but other than that, she had spent most of her adult life disconnected from her Irish ancestry. After a year or so of attending Irish language class, her instructor convinced her to go to a *Daltaí* immersion event in Esopus. “The biggest thing that kept me coming was all the people I met because there [are] so many different nationalities [and language levels]—beginners to fluent people—and I made all these wonderful new friends. So if I don’t keep it up, I lose them as well as the language,” she told me, emphasizing that, for her, the language event meant much more than the language (Fieldnotes in bar page 1-17).

In order to facilitate strong bonds of community, organizers stage a number of events. Some of these, such as Catholic mass given in the Irish language, the dance *céilí*, and music *seisiún*, were common to each event I attended, while at other sites, there were a number of special or unique activities: the “March,” a Psychic Fair, a trivial pursuit game, an Irish-language Olympics competition, and a hurling demonstration. Each was created not only for the purpose of introducing participants to a variety of Irish-like activities with the hope of prompting individuals

to intermix and converse in Irish, but I further argue that these events acted as a platform for developing attributes for Irish identity.

At the Saint Louis event, for example, we participated in a game of hurling, which was taught to us by one of the individuals who played in an organized league in the area (see Figure 4).

*Iománaíocht* or *iomáint*

“hurling” along with Gaelic Football, is a traditional Celtic game involving a *sliotar* “hard ball” and a *camán* “stick or hurley” played on a large field.

In contemporary Ireland the game is popular, in part due to



**Figure 4** The crew following a tough game of hurling outside of Saint Louis (source: photograph by author).

the county affiliation (each county sponsors a team with an All-Ireland champion crowned each year). In Ireland in 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was founded which was instrumental in the “...late-nineteenth-century Gaelic athletic revival” that “brought increased structure and codification to the traditional team sports of hurling and Gaelic football,” writes sports historian Ralph Wilcox (2006), stating that these ancient Celtic sports predated the Greek Olympic festivals as part of the Tailtean Games (443).

Although the hurling demonstration was short-lived and we played for fun and largely oblivious to the rules, the staging of this event was symbolic, as it reinforced the perception of Gaelic sport as being part of the traditional package that

the language event itself had come to represent. Donald, a language teacher from Ireland who I met on the West Coast, emphasized the importance of hurling and Gaelic football as emblematic of traditional Irish culture. He described for me an interesting situation in Dublin wherein African kids, who had been migrating with their parents to Ireland over the past decade or so, were excelling at the traditional Irish sports of hurling and Gaelic football. “Can you imagine an Ireland where ethnic minorities (which make up a very small percentage of the country’s population) are fluent speakers of the Irish language and become the countrywide stars of our traditional Irish games?” Donald asked me rhetorically (Fieldnotes in po page 219).

Hurling, with roots that predate the ancient Olympic games is highly symbolic in how it is seen by enthusiasts, such as Donald, as having a long and storied history—as a deep-seated Irish tradition. The demonstration at the Saint Louis weekend bolsters this message as it provides a link between sport and language that further enhances an enthusiast’s perception of tradition, despite the fact that many traditions are often inventions. As historian Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger 1983) famously writes in the book *The Invention of Tradition*: “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1). Activities such as hurling, which to some enthusiasts is indicative of a traditional form of Irish culture, help to create an image of what traditional Irish culture is for immersion-event participants.

Along similar lines, an activity that I witnessed at nearly every language event was the singing of *sean-nós* “old style,” a form of song which, according to historian Rebecca Miller (2006) “...once served the local Irish communities as a source of public news and as an oral record of local lore and history” (412). Ó hAllmhuráin (1998) explains how *sean nós* is an archaic form of song that, in the past, was comprised of regional dialects in the Irish language and is “[a] complex and magnificent art...an unaccompanied form of singing which demands tremendous skill and artistic understanding” that is “...derived in part from the bardic tradition of professional poetry which declined in the seventeenth century” (9).

Today, however, Miller (2006) explains that *sean nós* songs “...are sung strictly for entertainment, and contemporary *sean-nós* singers performing to American audiences tend to select repertoire in both Irish and English, and they shorten the songs to fit modern attention spans” (412). In 1960s and 1970s when Irish folk music became popular in America—the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem—*sean nós* was largely bypassed because of the language barrier and has only recently gained popularity (Ó hAllmhuráin 1998).

On numerous occasions throughout my field study I witnessed the singing of *sean nós*—including my nights at the Sicilian bar (see the story at the beginning of this chapter) where I was treated to singing by three All-Ireland champions. I also listened to an outstanding performance in Saint Louis, a number of others at *Daltaí* events in New York and Jamison, Pennsylvania, and another great exhibition at a *céilí* in Ontario. “A woman got up and sang a wonderful *sean nós* song,” I wrote during the *céilí* in Jamison, “I have not seen her perform before.... When these songs are

sung, everyone tries to stay quiet and listen intently... (Fieldnotes in po page 293-302).

I was told that the singing of *sean nós* added or enhanced an element of authenticity to a *seisiún* or *céilí*. At each event where such a performance ensued, it often began with a chorus of “shhhhhh-ing” from the audience that ended music and talking, followed by the performance of a solo singer without instruments. Most in the crowd would listen intently, with the exception of a few who would yell out words of encouragement. At some events, I witnessed another person holding the singer’s hand and twirling it around in circles while he or she sang.

This was pointed out to me as an Irish tradition that symbolized the highly emotional message delivered by the singer to the audience, and how for those who were delivering the song there was a need for a “wind up” in order for him or her to get the story out. Often the emotional content and delivery of the song was powerful enough that I witnessed tears running down the face of the singer, as well as down the faces of audience members.

Regarding *sean nós*, geographer Moya Kneafsey (2002) acknowledged how the pub *seisiún* maintains an element of authenticity that is often read differently by different audiences. She wrote of her experience at a *seisiún* in County Mayo, when only after the tourists left the pub did the “locals” leave their perches at the bar and descend upon the circle. She recollected that a young woman was then invited to sing “*sean-nós* style,” and shortly following the conclusion, there was a “brief silence and then shouts and claps broke the charged atmosphere created by the song” (356, 357, her emphasis). Kneafsey reinforces the idea that this type of song is a sign or



symbol of traditional Irish culture, one that is seldom understood by outsiders, and therefore for language-event participants, the performance of *sean nós* at the events adds an element of authenticity.

The staging of activities that highlighted other aspects of traditional Irish culture was also prevalent at a number of events. The performance of the Irish-language Catholic mass was an exercise held on Saturday in the



**Figure 5** - Catholic Mass in the Irish language in Butte, Montana (source: photograph by author).

late afternoon, or on Sunday morning, at either a language week or weekend, or on one occasion, following the Irish festival in Butte, Montana.

The annual Irish-language Mass given at a park in Uptown Butte was performed for the general public, rather than just for language-event attendees, and made more prominent the link between the Irish (as it was held in conjunction with the Irish festival), Catholicism, and the language (Figure 5). The priest cleverly presented this event, which occurred the second weekend of August in 2006, as a reenactment of a mass rock ceremony in Ireland, a method of celebrating Mass during the penal laws imposed by the English in the eighteenth-century in Ireland.

My notes describe the Mass accordingly:

It is a beautiful morning and the weather was great for the entire festival. No rain with a lot of sunshine and it was probably in the 80s most of the three days we were here. The Irish-language Mass is held at a park a few blocks down the hill from the festival grounds. Nothing much else is going on at the festival today, so the Mass is the main event. The music

and dancing is ended and the street is empty. Only the vendors remain for those that are still hanging out.

The priest is from [Montana]...and he is an Irish speaker. I thought to myself: “What are the odds of having an Irish-speaking priest in Montana?” [I saw] hundreds of people at the Mass sitting in chairs, as well as a large number sitting on the grass on the hill surrounding a smallish gazebo in the center of the park. Once the [language] teachers and my kids sat down on the lawn, I walked around and took photographs of the event. ...The priest used some English in his Homily and he talked about ethnicities and how they consisted of a patchwork of people. “It is great to celebrate culture, it is wonderful” he said, and he further commented that “th[is] place, this park was not meant for a Mass, but, our [Irish] ancestors celebrated the Eucharist in places not meant as places to celebrate.” In the old days in Ireland they celebrated around mass rocks, he told the congregation, further saying that this park in Butte serves as a metaphor for a mass rock in Ireland.<sup>33</sup> (Fieldnotes in po pages 16–18)

The performance of Mass at the language event or festival helps those in attendance and who participate to construct or reinforce the idea that Catholicism is an integral part of Irish identity (reference chapter three wherein historians describe this link in more detail). The addition of the language further enhances this experience, even though the language pre-dates Christianity in Ireland by thousands of years (Miller 1985), by making it seem that each is intrinsically part of an individual Irish identity. The priest in Butte, for example, further legitimized this link between Catholicism and Irish identity by informing the congregation that all were a part of a much older tradition—the mass rock—and that our gathering that day

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<sup>33</sup> In Ireland during the early- to mid-1700s, the penal laws were enacted by the British in an attempt to abolish Catholicism, instead advocating Protestantism. Resistance came in many forms, but Mass, which was banished in the churches and cathedrals “...was often said in private houses and at mass rocks in the open fields, or in ‘scathlans’ – little shelters where the priest and altar were at least partially protected from the elements” (Moody and Martin 1995, 226; see also Foster 1988, 208).

simulated an event that occurred hundreds of years ago in our home place. In essence, language, Catholicism, and Irishness all combined in helping us create and reinforce an “imagined geography” of place (I describe this idea in more detail in chapter eight).

“...[I]nsofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious,” writes Hobsbawm(1983), “[i]n short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition” (2). While the Mass had the effect of reinforcing a connection between Irish ethnicity and religion that was grounded in a storied past (as told by the priest anyway), “the March” at the end of each *Dáltaí na Gaelige céilí* that included the singing of both the *Stars and Stripes* and the Irish-language version of the *Ambrán na bhFiann* “Soldier Song”—the Republic of Ireland’s national anthem—conjured up thoughts of Irish Nationalism.

“I danced the last ‘March’ with Barbara” I wrote in my fieldnotes, describing how “[s]he grabbed me and we all lined up and sang the U.S. national anthem, followed by the Irish anthem. Most everyone knew the words [in Irish] to the Irish anthem. One of the event organizers stood up in front, emulating a marching band director, showing us with hand signals where to go as we marched toward the band. I noted that nearly all the seats around the perimeter of the room were vacant, which meant that everyone, perhaps as many as one-hundred people, was marching. I wondered at the time if this is what happened in Ireland after every *céilí*, or was this simply an Americanized version of the “March”? (Fieldnotes in places page 161).

At the finale, we all found ourselves herded into long and remarkably straight rows, facing the band and all of us singing loudly. I remembered having goose bumps, feeling a sense of Irish pride. Finally, when the March was over, I was relieved and saddened at the same time, knowing that the event was coming to an end, I was glad in one sense that I would not be under pressure anymore to speak the language, yet I would miss the camaraderie I had established with the others (Fieldnotes in po page 163–165).

The March, although short in duration, was a combination of Irish and American nationalism and a reinforcement of a hybrid or plural identity—Irish and American. Whether attending their very first language event, or their twentieth, and while some enthusiasts had no prior knowledge of having Irish ancestry while others were Irish-born citizens of Ireland, the March was a highly symbolic expression of Irish identity that brought everyone together in celebrating a collective sense of unity and cohesion, despite it being an obviously American invention.

Finally, the last two activities that I choose to describe are the *céilí* and *seisiún*, each, at least in some form, a component of every language event I attended. The *seisiún* is typically a music-oriented activity and the *céilí* involves dance.<sup>34</sup> The *céilí* was typically scheduled on the last evening of the immersion event, sometimes incorporating a *seisiún*, offering the participants an opportunity to watch, listen, and participate in music and singing—including *sean nós*, step and *céilí* dance—and to socialize with others while using Irish.

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<sup>34</sup> According to *Foclóir scoile: English-Irish, Irish-English dictionary* (1998), the definition of a *céilí* is “a friendly call, visit; social evening; Irish dancing session, dance”; whereas a *seisiún* is “session; (social gathering).”

Regarding the history of the *céilí*, traditional Irish music historian Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin (1998) writes about how this form of Irish cultural expression evolved into today's contemporary activity:

As well as focusing on the Irish language, the Gaelic League [*Conradh na Gaeilge*] also turned its attention towards a romantic reconstruction of Irish music, song and dance. Established by Douglas Hyde and Eoin McNeill in 1893, the movement quickly spread throughout urban Ireland, as well as to Irish immigrant communities in England and the United States. Its first *céilí* was held in London in 1897. (The term *céilí* was commonly used in Highland Scotland. The terms *cuaird* and *swaree*—from the French *soirée*—were more common in rural Ireland). The Gaelic League also laid down rules for dancing, and initiated the unprecedented practice of music and singing competitions. In contrast to the spontaneous set dancing of rural Ireland, the figure dances of the Gaelic League *céilí* were formal and formulaic. (82, his emphasis)

Traditional Irish music and dance were born out of the agricultural areas of the West of Ireland where *clacháns* “communities of Irish farmers” celebrated the passing of the seasons, as well as wakes and weddings, by hosting festivals that included music and informal house dances. Despite the work of the Gaelic League to set up rules for dance and the spread of the *céilí* outside of Ireland, the more traditional dance and music remained in rural Ireland (Ó hAllmhuráin 1998).

The adoption of the *céilí* and *seisiún* into the agenda of the language event provoked, for some, a sense of a more traditional and authentic form of Irish culture. Barbara, who I mentioned earlier in this chapter, commented to me how these activities enhanced her experience by “completing the whole picture.” When I asked what she meant by this, she replied:

I never [had seen] a *seisiún* until I came here. I didn't know what they did. I didn't know they got up and did party pieces. But I'm sure back in Ireland when they had their little get-togethers and they...danced at the crossroads or whatever, that was their social life. So...if we

can...keep...that going in a way..., you wouldn't want to lose that you know..., I can't...imagine what it must have been like in Ireland when they just went out and danced on the crossroads...when everybody [was] just singing a song and doing a dance. ...It's very special. But it does bring everyone together. Because you know you have the musicians who just play music, and then you have the dancers and so it [the language] [is] another great thing to throw into it. And then if you have people like when they have the *seisiún* here, the people that get up and recite poetry, or sing the songs you know...it's really neat. (Fieldnotes in places page 19)

The *seisiún* (or *céilí* in this case) was seen by Barbara as a combination of traditional Irish expressions that came together in one setting—performed on a single stage. Her understanding of these activities as parts of a long history linked back in time to a romanticized West of Ireland was a way for her to feel connected.



An important aspect of Barbara's story was that she fully enjoyed her experience at the *céilí* because of the sense of belonging and community that were created, and these were based on her perception that these activities were

**Figure 6** - Irish traditional band playing at the *céilí* in Jamison, Pennsylvania (source: photograph by author).

traditional to Ireland (Figure 6).

As Ó hAllmhuráin mentions, the

*céilí* was produced from similar activities occurring in the rural Irish past, but was adjusted and made into a different type of production; first in London and then North America. The *seisiún* too, as described by Kneafsey (2002; quoting Valley 1999) was similarly modified, as “a loose association of musicians who meet, generally but not always in a pub to play an un-predetermined selection, mainly of dance music, but sometimes with solo pieces such as slow airs or songs.... It has

become such an all-pervasive form of traditional music performance that it has led many to believe that it has a much longer pedigree than is actually the case” (354).<sup>35</sup> In other words, and as described by Hobsbawm (1983), these activities are thought by many to have deep roots in an Irish past when, in reality, they are modern inventions. Importantly, however, is that even though this is known by some enthusiasts, it does not seem to diminish their perception of what constitutes a traditional and authentic Irish culture.

While at the “pub” that evening, I noted how the place felt Irish to me even though it was clearly a Sicilian bar. This bar, as well as all the other spaces I visited during my fieldwork, was clearly made into an Irish place through the performances of the participants. Even though in most cases the stage of the language event was set up with subtle modifications, it was the transient and ephemeral performances—Irish-language Mass, *sean nós* singing, the “March,” music *seisiún* and dance *céilí*—that transformed these spaces into meaningful places. Whether the space dictated the performance of the actors and audience, or the performance made the space into an Irish-like place, the important aspect of this relationship was the message or meaning to be culled from these performances.

In the end, I argue that these spaces and the performances that make them into Irish places are sites where enthusiasts interact with others in developing attributes, guidelines, and parameters for their Irish identities. I further imply that

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<sup>35</sup> The *seisiún* may have evolved from the *clacháns* of Ireland or the *bothán* “cabin; shed; coop” bands or “bothy bands” where the Irish of the potato squads lived and played music in Scotland during and after the Famine, but the modern version is actually an American and English invention of Irish musicians beginning in the 1950s (Ó hAllmhuráin 1998; see also Miller 1983; Morton 2005).

ideas about what constitutes traditional or authentic Irish attributes, guidelines, and parameters are fostered in these spaces. The activities that occur within these spaces lay the foundation for the remaining chapters, within which I investigate in more detail how enthusiasts come to design and construct their Irish identities.



## Chapter Five: “Hip to Be Irish” Fashioning an Irish Identity

On August of 2006, I visited Milwaukee for the purpose of attending two events. The first was the Irish Fest Summer School, held on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, encompassing a number of cultural activities, lectures, and workshops that included classes in language, dance and music. The other was the Milwaukee Irish Fest, held downtown at the Henry W. Maier Festival Park, an event that began on Thursday evening and ended on Sunday and which organizers proclaimed to be the world’s largest. Walking through the front gate at around five



**Figure 7** “Irish Nachos” at the Milwaukee Irish Fest (source: photograph by author).

o’clock on Thursday evening, I was swallowed up by the thousands of spectators and participants walking around the immense festival grounds. Large crowds were listening and watching entertainers on dozens of stages, as well as buying Irish products from the

hundreds of food and beer vendors, and arts and crafts booths. The selling of Irish culture was on display in a variety of forms. There were Irish Nachos and Galway Chicken Salad for sale (Figure 7), family “coats of arms” and histories framed “while you wait,” genealogy booths where genealogists printed out your Irish ancestry in a matter of minutes, a tent for “Paddy Bingo,” and a makeshift village of Irish T-shirt

and jewelry vendors where I contemplated buying one shirt—“Celtic Girl: Goddess with an Attitude,” for my daughter.

As I strolled towards the center of the grounds, a large *céilí* dance workshop was being held on an outdoor basketball court with perhaps as many as two-hundred participants. Adjacent, and partly hidden behind a building, was a small amphitheatre where a children’s step-dance competition was in progress. Hundreds of anxious parents and smiling spectators filled the bleachers, while dancers, mostly teenage girls and younger, waited on each side of the stage for their turn. All were dressed in frilly, brightly-colored dresses, sporting large curly wigs, outfits which I had grown accustomed to seeing at each festival I attended over the past decade or so.

Large permanent music stages, each sponsored by American or Irish breweries such as Miller and Guinness and the Irish airline *Aer Lingus*, hosted a number of popular Irish traditional bands and dance troupes. Irish and Celtic musical acts often played simultaneously and included new-age rock, French Canadian Celtic, Nova Scotian fiddlers, and bands playing Irish folk songs made popular in the 1950s and 1960s.



**Figure 8** Saint Patrick at the Irish Fest in Milwaukee (source: photograph by author).

I walked the grounds for a few hours observing these activities; at one time I had walked through a children’s parade lead by Saint Patrick (Figure 8) who was

accompanied by Irish mascots of some sort. Finally, I reached the southern end of the complex where, tucked away from sight, was the Ballyfest Cultural Village. This quiet place was a respite from the hustle and bustle of activities making up a majority of the festival. It was comprised of a bookstore, arts and crafts tents, an Irish pub with a small traditional band, the *Conradh na Gaeilge* tent—where volunteers organized book signings, storytelling, *sean nós* singing, guest speakers, and workshops, and a children’s stage with a play performed in Irish (Fieldnotes in cc page 5).

Some enthusiasts who attended or volunteered at the festival preferred the Ballyfest village over the other venues, because it symbolized for them a more traditional form of Irish culture. Still others enjoyed a number of the performances such as the Trinity Dancers or the Nova Scotian fiddlers, but were not interested in the commercialized areas selling trinkets and offering genealogical readings. How an individual chose to symbolize his or her Irish ethnicity was largely based on subjective interpretations of what was and was not considered authentic, and this decision was further complicated by the consumption of ethnic-type products.

The primary focus of this chapter is my attempt to unravel the complex relationship between the construction of an Irish identity and the influence that practices of consumption have on this process. I begin first exploring the concept of commodity and commercial cultures (Jackson 1999, 2002) by interpreting the work of scholars in a number of disciplines—primarily geography—in showing how the construction of an Irish identity is influenced, at least partly, by consumption.

For some scholars, it is thought that white ethnics in America practice a form of “symbolic” or “optional” ethnicity expressed solely through the products they

consume. For others, their work is a search for a deeper understanding of the relationship between commercialization and identity construction as new identities are formed from acts of consumption that transcend both physical and cultural boundaries.

I next turn to my data, giving examples of how enthusiasts, through their use of specific words such as fashionable, trendy, hip, and cool, felt that a transition occurred in how Irish culture was expressed based initially on the recent popularity of Irish music and dance. In general, they thought that these newly popular forms of cultural expressions rejuvenated a mundane Irish culture, which, in turn, stimulated their interest in learning the Irish language. Some believed this newer version of Irishness, which was to them an American invention, was instrumental in reinvigorating the Irish culture in Ireland. In this sense, the commercialization or Americanization of Irish culture was to them a welcome change and served as a stimulus not only for their embracing a once repressed Irish identity, but for their feeling comfortable in the process of doing so.

But even so, a number of these same enthusiasts set their own limits as to how much commercialization of Irish ethnicity was acceptable to them. These boundaries were largely subjective, as individuals critiqued specific cultural expressions in different ways. For example, the wearing of wigs and colorful dresses by Irish step-dancers, thought to have been a result of an Americanized version of Irish dance, was both praised and criticized. Regardless of the popularity of the new Irishness, enthusiasts still established boundaries as to what they considered to be authentic even though they largely accepted the phenomenon.

I finalize my discussion by showing how commercially enhanced expressions of Irish identity prompted a blending together of Irish and Irish American cultures. Although the popularity of Irish cultural expressions was thought by many enthusiasts, as well as a handful of scholars, to be an invention of the North American diaspora—with *Riverdance* in particular as its root—in general, many welcomed this phenomenon as a bringing together of cultural attributes from both places. I show how this coalescing of the Irish and the Irish American formed, for some, a more attractive Irish identity.

### **Geographies of Consumption**

Irish-American journalist Maureen Dezell (2000) argues that in America, influenced at least in part by a new wave of Irish immigrants to America in the 1980s, there was a noticeable increase in the number of individuals wishing to identify with and express an Irish ethnicity. “Young people in particular became enthralled with a new sense of Irish inheritance that was more pagan than pious, unconventional instead of circumscribed, and authentic rather than synthetic,” she writes, referring to those who in large part wished to break free from the grip of the Catholic Church—still heavily influential with previous generations—and instead embrace unconventional ways in which to express their Irish identities through music, dance and language (213).

The connection between acts of consumption and identity production surfaces amongst the work of both scholars and language enthusiasts alike, as there is a notion that Irish ethnicity in North America is more “popular” now than any time in the past. Natasha Casey (2000) professes that “[i]n the mid-1990s, *Riverdance*

encountered a middle-class and white Irish America eager to embrace an alternative popular image” of Irishness (12), and historian Marilyn Halter (2000) further equates 1998 as the year when “the height of the vogue for all things Irish” peaked, with the popularity of *Riverdance*<sup>36</sup> and the follow-up *Lord of the Dance*, the release of the film *Good Will Hunting*, the Pulitzer-prize winning novel *Angela’s Ashes* by Frank McCourt, and the worldwide popularity of Celtic music, particularly that of Clannad and Enya (120–122).

Dave, a forty-something dual citizen of America and Ireland who was a fluent speaker of Irish, felt that the recent popularity of Irish ethnicity was reflected in the number of those interested in learning the Irish language. “There are hundreds of languages out there and I believe myself that all languages are equal,” he explained, “it doesn’t matter if there’s a handful speaking it or millions, they’re all equal. But on the same basis if they’re all equal, Irish is getting selected more often than you’d expect. It’s get[ting] more hits [than] what you’d expect” (Fieldnotes in cc page 10).

Scholars wrote and language enthusiasts spoke of a noticeable increase in the number of people attending festivals, dance workshops, music sessions, and language classes, reasoning that this was due to the popularity of Irish cultural expressions portrayed through media, tourism, advertising, and entertainment. “Hipsters and historians hailed the arrival of a ‘new Irish identity’ at the turn of the century,” Dezell

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<sup>36</sup> On the *Riverdance* official website (<http://www.riverdance.com> (last accessed 9 December 2009), individuals can attend the production as it continues touring worldwide, as well as purchase merchandise, enter competitions, and read personal diaries of dancers. In March of 2010, *Riverdance* is performing their farewell show by having eight performances at Radio City Music Hall in New York City.

(2000) explains, and “[b]y some lights, the ‘new Irish’ identity in the United States is a newer, hipper version of what the sociologist Gans calls ‘symbolic ethnicity’—the tendency among latter-generation white ethnics in the United States to pick and choose among the more appealing aspects of their heritage, to identify themselves as Irish on St. Patrick’s Day or Italian while vacationing in Tuscany, but American and middle-class at work” (213, 214).

Dezell’s mentioning of the work of Gans and his idea of “symbolic ethnicity” further emphasizes the notion that Irish American ethnicity is not only a choice, but further, it can be turned on-and-off and expressed in a variety of ways. Additionally, she writes that: “[s]ymbolic ethnicity is little more than spice sprinkled on a bland American culture of telecommuting, suburban sprawl, and shopping malls,” in essence implying that, in the larger context of the American cultural mosaic, individuals who identify with an Irish ethnicity do so because it can be relatively easy, and can satisfy their wish to maintain difference between themselves and others (214).

Dezell’s statements provide a starting place by showing how acts of consumption and commercialization affect an individual’s design of their Irish identity. She ties the recent popularity of Irishness—expressed through book and movie sales, music and stage shows, genealogy searches and language classes—as the catalyst for a “new Irish ethnicity,” which is grounded in an enhanced version of symbolic ethnicity.

Popular expressions of ethnicity coincide with a change in how North Americans exercise their flexible ethnicities. Historian Marilyn Halter (2000)

describes a “...changing relationship between ethnic identity formation and consumer culture” which “evolved across the American landscape during the second half of the twentieth century.” She further reasons that “in modern times, people most often construct their own identities and define others through the commodities they purchase” (6). In essence, Halter argues that ethnicity, particularly amongst those immigrant groups who have lived in North America for a number of generations, is now produced through the process of consumption.

If contemporary ethnicity amongst latter-generation whites is thought to be largely symbolic, expressing it can be easily accommodated through the act of purchasing ethnic products or participating in “services”—which can be anything from eating ethnic food to learning the language of one’s perceived ancestors.

In reference to those of Irish ancestry specifically, film critic Diane Negra (2006) reasons that “[i]n the realm of commodified Irishness there is now a price point for every taste and budget” where “fantasies of Ireland posit a culture unsullied by consumerism and modernity, Irishness is nevertheless a buy-in category and it comes in a staggering variety of consumable forms available across a broad spectrum of outlets” (3, 4). Negra further argues that even the image of Ireland as a rather primitive and pristine place, untouched by the power of consumerism, is in and of itself made attractive to consumers of ethnicity. The design of an Irish ethnicity, to these writers and scholars, is based entirely on the products they consume.

This idea is broadly shared by a number of geographers. Denis Cosgrove (2000) contends that identity construction and the production of individual social lives are now, more than ever, affected by acts of consumption. New identities are



emerging based on “bodily appearance, sexuality, food or fashion choices, taste in music, entertainment or lifestyle, and to form voluntary associations with others who share such cultural identity,” he writes, enabling individuals “to shape and reshape their identities in different times and places.” He describes acts of consumption as means of “transgression” overriding cultural boundaries once thought to be “fixed in space and stable over time,” instead creating more fluid and hybrid forms of identity (137; see also Thrift 2000a).

Thus, Cosgrove stresses how identities are formed through acts of consumption which are individualized and formed for a number of purposes for different reasons and at different times. These identities transcend borders, or cultural boundaries, dispelling the idea that cultures themselves are tied to specific places. Instead they exist in a number of places where individuals can choose to form groups comprising similar interests. These ideas tie into the underlying theme of ethnic choice, as the options for expressing an individual identity and the volunteer nature of joining any number of groups, organizations, or enthusiasms is less restrictive and often more comfortable for white ethnics in contemporary North America than it was in the past (Gans 1979).<sup>37</sup>

The idea that consumption practices form new identities that override political and cultural boundaries, however, runs counter to the fixed and static concept of rootedness and belonging. Jackson (2008) uses as an example contemporary Asians living in Britain. He explains a phenomenon that occurred in

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<sup>37</sup> Geographer Benjamin Forest (2002) discusses the concept of “symbolic ethnicity” in terms of race in America, wherein for whites, ethnicity is largely a choice, for blacks and Hispanics, it is still tied up in historical constructions of race and is not a choice.

the late 1990s, when the media uncovered and subsequently promoted a South Asian trend—“Asian chic”—that materialized through fashion clothing, pop music, magazines, nightclubs, and television programs. All of a sudden, he writes, it was “cool to be Asian’,” as Asian ethnicity became part of the mainstream and the second-generation of immigrant Asian parents found a niche of acceptability within a largely white British society (419; see also Jackson 2002).

Yet in this case, Jackson (2008) found that the commercialization of Asian culture created tension from others within the Asian British community who felt the popularizing of their culture challenged their notions of authenticity (419). He further quotes bell hooks (1992), who argues that “‘ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’, suggesting that this relationship between the ‘ethnic’ and the ‘mainstream’ was purely parasitic [when] communities of resistance had been replaced by communities of consumption, with commodification stripping the signs of difference of their political integrity and cultural meaning” (421).

Jackson (2008) brings up two important points when using this example of Asians in Britain. The first concerns the negotiation between two generations as to the impact of consumptive practices on their culture when the older generation wishes to maintain tradition, the younger generation seeks acceptance by mainstream Britains. And the second, and as promoted by bell hooks (1992), stresses the idea that peripheral cultures are “mined” of their appealing expressions by those in power for the purpose of financial gain, or to provide “spice” or difference for an otherwise bland whiteness. This process, in turn, homogenizes the culture being exploited, in

essence diminishing its ability to provide resistance. Jackson is critical of this thinking, as he feels it reinforces a binary relationship between cultures. He instead advocates a new way of looking at the relationship between culture and consumption in positive ways: hybrid and encompassing multiple connections and the sharing of cultural attributes.

In an attempt to mesh these ideas with the words and actions of language enthusiasts, I next demonstrate the role of consumption and commercialization in the construction of their Irish identities.

### **The Popularity of the Irish Language**

In the mid-1990s, after four or five years of dabbling with language learning through Irish books and tapes, Caitlin, an Irish language enthusiast from the Midwest, decided to attend Irish language school at *Oideas Gael* in Donegal, Ireland. While she was there, fellow students convinced her that she should begin teaching an Irish class when she returned home. “So teach a bunch of people and then...you’ll all like just discover it together, you know, bootstrap yourselves and off you go,” she remembered them telling her. She further told me: “I thought: ‘Well, that’s a preposterous notion. I’m going to go back home and teach Irish you know!’”[rolling her eyes sarcastically].

She figured it was a miracle of sorts when shortly after her return from Ireland she happened to bump into a native Irish speaker at the local Irish bar, who, after a long conversation, convinced her that those people in Ireland were right and she that should indeed teach Irish. “Yeah, that ought to be dicey,” she told him, envisioning herself sitting in a classroom all by herself, the only one wishing to learn

Irish. Shortly thereafter, Caitlin stood in front of a woman in the Adult Education office at the local community college, and suggested to her that they offer a course in Irish.

“Oh yeah, that would be great, we’ll offer Irish,” said the woman, but she informed Caitlin there was to be a minimum of eight students in order for the college to sponsor the course. Caitlin was skeptical. But a few weeks later, after the schedules went out, the woman called her back asking her what “cap” she wished to place on the number of students who would be allowed to take the course:

“What?” Caitlin replied. “Well hell, I don’t care, any...whatever you want to do.”

She said. “No, I’m serious, ‘cause we have like seventeen people who want to take the class.”

“You’re kidding? How could you have seventeen people, I mean that’s ridiculous.” Caitlin told her. “Well, what do we do with the other folks?”

“I don’t know,” said the woman. “Let’s put in a second session.”  
(Fieldnotes in cc pages 206, 250)

Caitlin was surprised at the number of those wishing to take her course because for many years she had felt that she was the only one in the vicinity who was interested in learning Irish. She began by ordering books and tapes and struggling to understand the basics of the language on her own until she discovered the existence of language schools in Ireland, where she then went annually for more than a decade. Yet it was not until she decided to teach the course that she discovered how popular the language had become, and she subsequently uncovered a network of language enthusiasts that stretched across the country.

Caitlin's story was quite common. Most event organizers, and a number of Irish teachers, shared a similar tale. While struggling with learning Irish on their own, they decided to advertise and form an Irish language class or immersion event, only to be surprised to discover the large number of participants signed up.

The popularity of the Irish language, however, was thought to be at the tail end of a much larger trend involving Irish traditional music and dance, in particular the dance production *Riverdance*. In fact, for a large number of enthusiasts, their knowledge that the language existed prior to *Riverdance* was questionable. "I've come across Irish Americans who have never [known] that there is a language, or else they believe it is a dead language, I mean they have no idea, they think it's an accent of English you know, or a dialect of English, like the brogue," explained Bryan, a language learner living on the East Coast of the U.S. (Fieldnotes in gui page 65).

David, a fifty-something fluent speaker of Irish who helped organize and promote language events along the East Coast, similarly found that a number of his Irish American friends, as well as himself, were for many years not aware Irish even existed. "You're going to get people attending [festivals] that have some connection or some desire and they discover the language of Ireland," he said. "You'd be surprised that people don't know the language exists," he further explained, telling me that even though his mother is from Ireland, and he worked in a tourist hotel in Dublin for a number of summers when in his twenties, he only really found out when he read an advertisement for a language class being taught near his home in New York. "I was vaguely aware that there was a language," he said, "so if it

happened to me, [well] people don't know! They think Irish is English—a sort of brogue” (Fieldnotes in cc page 10, 12).

Not realizing that the Irish language exists, let alone the presence of Irish class and immersion events, was, and still is to an extent, a common occurrence according to a number of enthusiasts. Only in some places, like New York City and other regions along the East Coast, was the language taught on a regular basis to small numbers in classrooms, Irish centers, pubs, and immersion events, prior to the production of *Riverdance* in the mid-1990s.

Lucille moved to New York from the north of Ireland in the early 1990s; initially she worked as a waitress and taught Irish to small groups in the evenings. “I used to work four evenings a week and teach three classes at three different places,” she said, emphasizing that up until the past few years, it was not possible to make a living teaching the language.

Yet towards the end of the 1990s, she began to notice an increase in the number of classes and teachers throughout the city, and then she eventually secured a job at a local college teaching the Irish language in a full-time capacity. “I found it is much easier on a constitution like this because the system helps you along so you don't have to do as much background work as I would have had in the past,” she said, and now “[f]or example, when I started here 10 years ago, the first course had three students and then compare that to last semester, just 9 years later, we had sixteen. Courses were closed six weeks before the beginning of the semester, so obviously there is an interest” (Fieldnotes in cc page 92).

When asked why they thought the language gained in popularity towards the end of the millennium, many credited the commercial success of a number of other forms of Irish cultural expressions—primarily dance and music. Brought to the public’s attention through the medium of television, radio, movies, and dance productions such as *Riverdance*, those like Caitlin found the number of students signing up for classes far exceeding their expectations.

Lucille reasoned that many who registered for her courses learned of the language through popular media such as movies and television that exposed a new, more exciting Irish culture to a larger Irish American population. “Sometimes it’s the little things that have [the] most influence,” she said, “like *Million Dollar Baby*<sup>38</sup> when people recognize, often for the first time, that the language exists (Fieldnotes in gui page 65).

A number of others came to the language through other forms of cultural expression, in particular, Irish traditional and New-Age music. Rose, another East Coast language teacher, told me she often asked her students why they came to her class?: “Oh I heard this Irish song you know...’, and they want to know the words and they want to know how to pronounce it,” she explained, “and we get a lot of people that come through the music, I believe” (Fieldnotes in cc page 6). Saul, a New York City resident of Jewish ancestry, discovered that the Irish language existed only after hearing the lyrics from the band Clannad, an Irish musical group who sing a number of their songs in Irish. He told me he first saw their words printed on the

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<sup>38</sup> In this film, directed by and starring Clint Eastwood, he plays the role of a boxing trainer who is teaching himself Irish (Gaelic).

inside of a CD cover and thought it was curious because at the time he was not aware that the language existed. “I just thought it would be interesting and a challenge” he explained to me. In turn, Saul’s discovery of the language from a music CD began a journey that led to his earning a Master’s degree in Irish Studies, and a love of the language which was now an integral part of his life (Fieldnotes in gui page 23, 24).<sup>39</sup>

Language teachers and event organizers recognized an increase in the number of those attending their classes and events, and further reasoned that it was the influence of Irish music and dance that drew them to the language. Further was a perception amongst these same enthusiasts that identifying oneself with the Irish was now more popular than in the past, as they subsequently described it as fashionable, trendy, hip, and cool to be Irish. How Irishness became such a sensation was, according to many enthusiasts, a direct result of the dance production *Riverdance*.

### **A New and Improved Irish Culture**

While standing outside the *Conradh na Gaeilge* tent on Friday night of the Milwaukee Irish Fest, I spoke with Dan and Gloria, sixty-something siblings who described for me their recent interest in learning the Irish language. Because they both loved Irish literature and poetry, their initial reason for attending Irish class was that of learning to translate Irish poems into English.

Additionally, they enjoyed listening and playing Irish traditional music—one played the fiddle and the other the *bodhrán* (drum), and they felt that their knowledge

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<sup>39</sup> According to the official website of Clannad (<http://www.clannad.ie> (last accessed 13 August 2009), the band has “...given a unique voice to modern Irish music” whereas “[m]any of these records have featured lyrics in their native Gaelic tongue.”



of the language enhanced their musical experiences. Although their grandparents came from Ireland and they strongly identified themselves as Irish, it was not until the past few years that they had felt compelled to further accentuate the Irish part of their identities through music and language.

When I asked what it was they thought stimulated their interest they responded by saying:

“Well, right now it’s cool to be Irish,” stated Gloria.

“Yeah and why is that?” I asked.

“Well, part of it was the *Riverdance* trend,” she reasoned.

“Think so?” Dan asked her.

“Part of it...I feel a big part of it was,” she said.

“And I wonder how that got going?” I asked.

“Some of that I think.... It was a very nice show, but some of it was pride.” Dan explained.

“Part of it was pride. It came out of the Euro competition,” Gloria said.

“Yes, but it was a half-time thing.... And people were impressed with it. They did so much talking about it that they took it on-the-road type thing and made it into a show.” He said.

“And they did it as an extravaganza,” she added.

“It caught people’s attention you know,” he reasoned.

“But it was a way for the Irish people in Ireland who were following the culture to see that they could make a living out of...you know, dancing or the Irish music. They talk a lot about *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* bringing back the Irish music. They’re a big reason the traditional music...” Gloria said.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann* is an organization based in Ireland with branches in many countries with a mission to promote and preserve Irish traditional music (see [www.comhaltas.ie](http://www.comhaltas.ie) (last accessed 15 December 2009)).

“...Yeah, they do this with the language too.” Dan interrupted.

“Oh yes and then the language with it. But they’re a big reason that traditional music is heard again in Ireland,” Gloria replied.

(Fieldnotes in cc page 73)

Not only were Dan and Gloria insistent that *Riverdance* was the primary reason that a large number of people began identifying themselves as Irish, but they further reasoned that it had acted as a catalyst for a transformation in the Irish culture in general—both in North America and Ireland.

Enthusiasts often expressed how Irish culture was once thought to be introverted, submissive, and remorseful; yet following *Riverdance*, they felt the Irish people seemed more extroverted, outgoing, and confident. Nearly all who I spoke with at language events and festivals told stories similar to that of Dan and Gloria. They felt that, following *Riverdance*, a transition had occurred in the general perception of Irish culture, and they reasoned that it was the stimulus for the reinvention, promotion, and repackaging of Irish culture through a revitalization of traditional Irish dance and music.

Indeed *Riverdance* was seen by language enthusiasts, journalists, and academics alike as a catalyst for a new and enhanced form of Irish culture. Media scholar Natasha Casey (2002) explains how Irish-American dancers Jean Butler and Michael Flatley saw *Riverdance* as breaking the “...traditional rules of Irish dancing by combining [Jean] Butler and [Michael] Flatley’s modern (“sexy”) approach with the rather worn, more traditional (never “sexy”) dance form” that was rooted in Ireland (10). Butler, from Long Island, and Flatley, who grew up in the south side of Chicago, created *Riverdance* as a brief production for the 1994 Eurovision song

contest in Dublin. It was so well-received by audiences there that by 1996 it turned into a larger and longer production and began to tour worldwide.

“While *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* [a spin off] both emanated from Ireland,” writes historian Marion Casey (2006, 417), “the innovations reflected in them were actually honed in the United States by American-born dancers [Flatley and Butler] fluent in traditional step dancing methods.” These productions “used the traditional precision of Irish step dancing to create large choreographed works that emphasized heavy synchronized battering in line dancing and dance drama,” she continues, further stating that those in the United States were by far the largest consumers of these productions. So not only was the show produced by Americans, it was also consumed by them (417).

Importantly, *Riverdance* was viewed by enthusiasts as an augmented version of Irish dance that symbolized a reinvigorated and exciting Irish culture produced by individuals of Irish descent living outside of Ireland—those of the Irish diaspora, who spruced up an otherwise dull Irish identity (N. Casey 2002).

Ray O’Hanlon (1998), author and editor of the Irish American weekly—the *Irish Echo*—was adamant about the role of Irish America in this Irish cultural revival. “For centuries, the Irish have been roaming the earth in search of new places to establish and express their Irishness. But the idea of ‘Irishness’ being a global phenomenon, not necessarily joined at the hip to Ireland itself, is something quite new,” he writes, further explaining that “Ireland’s emergence as a truly modern European nation has been mirrored by an Irish cultural revival that has roots in the United States and other countries” and “[i]f *Riverdance* was Ireland proudly presenting

its culture anew to a global audience, it should be remembered that the feet that really kicked the show into prominence were American” (3).

In the words of Natasha Casey and O’Hanlon, along with language enthusiasts Dan and Gloria, the popularization of Irish culture prompted by *Riverdance*, as well as other forms of Irish cultural expressions, transformed how individuals constructed their own identities by instilling a sense of pride and a desire to enact or restart an Irish ethnicity that was largely dormant.

There was little doubt amongst Irish event organizers and teachers that *Riverdance* was heavily influential in introducing more people to the language. Rose not only taught Irish in New York, but she also helped organize language events at a variety of places along the east coast, and her recollection of the impact of *Riverdance* on language was dramatic: “We were turning people away at the [language] weekends for lack of space” (Fieldnotes in cc page 3). When I asked Marvin, a language teacher from New Jersey, why he thought there had been such a large increase of students in his language classes, as well as a renewed interest in Irish music, dance, and language in general, he said one word: “*Riverdance*.” He felt it had “sparked” an interest in Irish culture again—“it gave Irish culture a new face” (Fieldnotes in po page 104).

“I think it was *Riverdance* and the reintroduction of Irish culture,” Mary told me, while we were standing together watching an Irish *céilí* dance at the Kingston, Ontario, immersion weekend. She and her husband moved to Toronto from Ireland forty years ago, and she was getting back to the Irish language after a long absence. “Now it is fashionable to be Irish,” she said, whereas when she and her husband came over, “it was not that way at all” (Fieldnotes in pi page 4).

“We were very quiet when we came at first, we didn’t...have the confidence to..., we certainly wouldn’t want to be going back to the old roots at that time, see, we were young...we could be one of them.” Mary was emphasizing their wish of assimilating into their new lives as Canadians and how they were not comfortable being outsiders with funny accents, so they kept their Irish identities to themselves, listening and playing Irish music only inside their home, and raising their children Canadian (Fieldnotes in pi page 4).

So Mary’s Irish ethnicity remained largely concealed until a revival of interest came about, prompted by *Riverdance*, which made her feel more comfortable in expressing her ethnic identity. She further described:

We, my husband and I, seemed to get our confidence back. I, along with a few others, then began an Irish dance school and it became quite popular. This then got me back to the language. After I found out that some were giving Irish classes in Ottawa and Kingston, I jumped right in. It all came back in torrents. I was amazed. And above all, I got my confidence back! (Fieldnotes in cc page 4)

Her acknowledgement of a transition occurring, and with it a confidence in “being Irish,” in turn, promoted an upswing in how Irish ethnicity was perceived from the outside. “Now we have people coming to us wanting to come to our events,” she said, referring to their dance classes and language-immersion events—a “total reversal...[w]e got the confidence to speak the way we speak [and play] our music that we know is really good” (Fieldnotes in cc page 253).

Teddy, a language teacher who grew up in Ireland, but who lived a majority of his adult life in and around the Philadelphia area, similarly recognized a shift that took place in Irish culture following the introduction of *Riverdance*. The transformation also included a rethinking of what it meant to engage with the Irish

language. “Oh I think the music and dance is wonderful. I think, again, that [it has] gone through a revival. There was a time in Ireland when it was, and it was probably around the time when I was growing up in Ireland, it was a backward thing,” explained Teddy when talking about the Irish language, “you know to be interested in things Irish [is], it’s...cool” (Fieldnotes in pa page 12).

Language enthusiasts frequently used the word “confidence” when describing for me their belief that the Irish people and their culture—both in North America and Ireland, individually and as a community, underwent a fundamental change over the past few decades. Originally labeled with the negative stereotypes of guilt, self-pity and uncertainty, these same Irish are now self-assured and confident.

Teddy further credited *Riverdance* as being a monumental factor in not only introducing Irish Americans to their traditional roots, but taken a step further, in boosting the spirit of Irish people everywhere:

[T]here’s been incredible dancing and probably more than anything the spirit of self-assurance that comes with the national identity is to me, just, it’s very exciting and very heartening having grown up in a culture that was ashamed of itself a lot of the time, [when] shame was a very common trait. And even to look at the body language, a lot of people growing up there were turned in on themselves. And this [*Riverdance*] is sort of broadcasting to the world: “We’re strong...we’re wonderful artists, wonderful musicians, and we are proud of it!” You know that’s what *Riverdance*...is and continues to say to the world. I just think it’s been a wonderful thing. (Fieldnotes in pi page 102)

Popular expressions of Irish ethnicity were seen by many enthusiasts to be largely beneficial, not only because they stimulated an individual’s interest in their ethnic identity but they also created a universal uplifting of Irish culture in general. Yet the hipness and fashionable nature of Irish ethnicity similarly brought about questions regarding authenticity, when processes of consumption and

commercialization can sometimes be thought to undermine what many consider pure and traditional expressions of culture.

### Consumption and Authenticity

The notion that Irish culture was in need of rejuvenation was generally embraced by most language enthusiasts, but others voiced concerns that there were indeed limits to this new version of Irishness. An Americanized and consumer-oriented Irish identity came at the expense of what some perceived of as traditional, and specific expressions or performances of Irishness were sometimes thought too commercial—losing elements of authenticity.

Emily, a fluent speaker I met at the Milwaukee Irish Fest, and who volunteered for *Conradh na Gaeilge* (the Gaelic League) told me: “I’d rather hang out with somebody from here [those here who are in the Cultural Village], than you know, well, I definitely don’t want to hang out with the Shamrock People, that’s not my thing, but...I guess I would definitely lean more towards this, but I don’t want to



**Figure 9** Budweiser Cat in the Hat hat (source: photograph by author).

sound snobby about it, like I would never, you know, discount somebody because they’re wearing, you know, a Cat in the Hat hat (Figure 9) (Fieldnotes in trad page 21).

Emily constructed a boundary between herself and the “Shamrock People” by saying she favored those who hung out in the Ballyfest

Emily constructed a boundary between herself and the

Cultural Village because they seemed to be less influenced by the commercialized version of Irish culture that was visible elsewhere on the festival grounds. Those who wear the Budweiser-sponsored hat symbolized for her, as well as a number of others, a person who literally “buys into” a tainted, less authentic, and Americanized Irish culture that is heavily influenced by corporate sponsors and their emphasis on consumption.

Sometimes the border between acceptable and not acceptable was dependent on the level of commercialization tolerated by the individual. Nathan, who I mentioned previously, established this boundary through his interpretation of Irish dance. He told me, regarding *Riverdance*:

...I thought it was neat...to popularize the step dancing like that and it was pretty pure, the way traditional... like the way they [the Irish] kept it. But then it quickly got super popularized. I mean *Lord of the Dance* where they were bringing in...these Madonna's...lightshow managers...and all that. I didn't care much for that. And then there's a new one they started that is completely out of hand. It becomes, well, they just try to...capitalize on...to make money.... I think it's reached a bubble you know...in terms of popularity. (Fieldnotes in dd page 34)

Nathan felt that *Riverdance* was an accurate representation or “pure” and “traditional” Irish dance and culture. The sequels, however, were much less authentic and designed specifically for financial gain. The boundary between what he considered authentic and not authentic was based on a blurred border that was constructed through his own interpretation of authenticity.

Still others felt that *Riverdance*, and step dancing in general, was not representative of “real” Irish dance. Nora, a first-generation Irish American, said she did not like the “dolloed up” look of the American dancers. They were much more



“artificial” than the dancers in Ireland. She thought that the Americans and the Irish began competing against each other, the result being the dresses and wigs, which evolved into a spectacle. “Can you imagine these outfits with the Irish who didn’t have any money?” she asked me, referring to the poverty she knew that her cousins in Ireland had experienced when she was younger (Fieldnotes in po page 4).

The process of and reasons for establishing guidelines for authenticity is a subject of study that concerns DeLyser (1999), who investigates how individuals develop parameters of authenticity based on their interpretation of landscape—in her case the ghost town of Bodie, California. “With such a wide array of ghost towns, how can authenticity be understood in such places?” she asks, when comparing a number of different ghost towns that take on a variety of forms and meanings. Her answer is that “...we must view authenticity as a socially constructed concept. In other words, authenticity is not simply a condition inherent in an object, awaiting discovery, but a term that has different meanings in different contexts, in different places, to different people, and even to the same person at different times” (612). When viewed in this manner, attributes of an authentic Irish identity must be thought of as both individual and group constructions.

As shown above, defining parameters of Irish identity based on what language enthusiasts consider or perceive to be authentic is rather a common occurrence. Returning to Jackson’s (2002, 2008) example of “Asian-chic” and how different generations of ethnics see popularized versions of their culture through a different lens based on tradition and authenticity, I felt that language enthusiasts participated in a similar practice. Jackson (1999, 2002, and 2008) however encourages

us to look at cultures of consumption as a means for transcending these fixed notions of culture and place. Indeed many enthusiasts saw the popularity of Irish ethnicity as greatly enhancing their perception of the culture, and, in fact, embraced a mixture of the cultural attributes from both Ireland and North America, each influencing the other in positive ways.

Many enthusiasts felt that there existed an American version of Irish culture that was given a boost by a number of commercialized forms of ethnic expression. This same process was returned back to Ireland, in effect, stimulating their culture in similar ways. In essence, this “new Irish ethnicity” (Dezell 2000) formed through practices of consumption, transcended national borders, and promoted, as Cosgrove (2000) writes (and as I quoted above), the formation of “voluntary associations with others who share such cultural identity” allowing individuals “to shape and reshape their identities in different times and places” (137).

The notion that commercialized forms of Irish cultural expressions enlivened and bettered both Irish American and Irish cultures was expressed to me by a few language enthusiasts. For example, Dave, a forty-something language teacher who had the unique experience of growing up and living an equal amount of time in Ireland and the U.S., saw the intermixing of both cultures as a necessity. “You have to let all the different cultures have an influence and intermingle to a certain extent or languages and music won’t live,” he reasoned, further explaining: “I can’t remember when your *Riverdance* was.... What was it? Maybe ten years ago? So Irish dance changed overnight [he snapped his fingers]. But it needed to change. It needed a bit of fresh air, and that’s kept it alive” (Fieldnotes in tir page 6, 7).

Dave further spoke of his being Irish as a hybrid identity. He explained how the Irish often see Americans as commercializing Irishness while the Americans see the Irish in Ireland, especially the West, as representative of an authentic Irish ethnicity. Having lived and worked in both places, Dave expressed his notion of identity in this way:

You know, when you see it from Ireland, okay, you see America, the Irish Americans from Ireland [and] you kind of think [that] it's all gloss and leprechauns and...not much substance. But then when you're actually there [America], there is sort of the gloss and the leprechauns and the shamrocks, but there's substance. So, the Trinity Dancers, okay, they wear the wigs—which are actually being more prevalent in Ireland, but they're not the norm. And their wearing the...dresses—well, the dresses are the same, but they [Americans] have these real bright colors that we wouldn't really get in Ireland. But the quality of the dancing is excellent. So you know, that's normal, meaning [that the] culture has to be a two-way flow, it can't be just Irish culture coming here and staying the same in: "Don't change it!" (Fieldnotes in dem page 23, 24)

Dave's comparison between the two seemingly different cultures—Irish and Irish American, by using as basis, Irish dance, enforces the idea that the meaning and parameters of Irish culture are hybrid—a blend of a perceived commercialized notion of Irish culture in America with that which is thought to be pure and traditional in Ireland. He promotes a give-and-take process on the part of each side: the Irish diaspora in America, and everywhere else for that matter, and the Irish in Ireland.

The effects of Americanized Irish culture had also been witnessed by some in Ireland. Bryan, an East Coast language student, who travelled to Ireland a few times each year with his Irish-born wife, explained: "I always look at the whole Celtic Tiger era [and,] I...associate that with *Riverdance* in '94" [the first show was in Ireland this

year], he said, “because that’s about the time that it all kicked in.... I have friends [who use it as] their number one language. They’re going to speak [Irish] in a *Gaeltacht* in Donegal and [sighs]...but the one thing I have seen a lot [with] what’s going on in Ireland is it’s... almost becoming hip to have Irish [and] at this point and time it’s fashionable” (Fieldnotes in cc page 257, 258, my emphasis).

To Bryan, the hip and fashionable nature of Irish culture was driven by a reinvigorated Irish economy along with the dance production of *Riverdance*, when combined, generated more interest amongst the Irish themselves in their own culture. This, in turn, reinforces Dave’s perception that the transferability of cultural expressions and their modifications is a two-(or more) way street.

Another important aspect of the effect of commercialization and consumption on the construction of Irish identity is that it is not a new concept. Nora told me that while she was growing up in Boston in the 1950s and 1960s, popular Irish music was an important aspect of her childhood and helped to define her Irish identity as a child:

...[N]ot that it ever died out, [as] the Irish always had it, but the revival of interest in it started here with the Clancy Brothers. The American kids, the Irish-American kids went nuts for them. And then they kind of went mainstream America...[which then] went back to Ireland. And they say the same is happening with the language, that: “Why are they all having such a good time with this language [questioning by the Irish]?” And then it’s kind of peaked interest again [in Ireland]. (Fieldnotes in cc page 7)

Nora reasoned that at least part of her Irish identity was constructed from the popular version of Irish music in the 1950s, which shows that the popularizing of Irish identity in America was present before the “new and fashionable” phase was thought to have more recently begun (see Dezell 2000; Halter 2000). It also

demonstrates the dynamic nature of Irish cultural production in North America as being constructed from a number of places at different times (Cosgrove 2000).

Jackson (2008) cautions us not to think of identity as simply a commodity—when “...‘cultural difference *sells*’,” resulting in a cultural pessimism based on a perceived cannibalism of identity (419, 420). Instead, he suggests we should expose the multiple meanings attached to cultures of commercialization from the perspective of circular networks of production and consumption—a sharing of cultural attributes amongst a number of people and places, rather than a lineal two-way process focused on native cultures and fixed conceptions of place-based identities (419, 421; see also Cook and Crang 1996).

Returning to the beginning of this chapter, when I described the numerous ways I witnessed Irish culture being commodified, I remember feeling disenchanted with the production of the entire event. Only upon entering into the Ballyfest village did I feel I was experiencing what I perceived of as a more authentic place. I now recognize how I made these judgments based on my previous construction of what I considered traditional and authentic. Subsequently, following my interviews with language enthusiasts, I discovered how important the meanings of these words are to those individuals who are constructing an Irish identity.

For some enthusiasts, the mention of words associated with consumption, commercialization, and commodification—such as enthusiast’s common usage of fashionable, trendy, hip, and cool—provoked a negative connotation by lessening their perception of authentic Irish culture. While for others, these same words were

thought of in positive ways, as a means for their now identifying with their Irish ancestry.

In this sense, I do not agree with those who promote the idea that the new Irish ethnicity is a product of consumption. “While there is much to criticize about contemporary commodity cultures,” writes Jackson (1999, 96), “the complexities and contradictions of commodification are easily missed by those who adopt a rhetoric of moral outrage and blanket disapproval.” In other words, I support the idea that language enthusiasts practice a symbolic and optional form of identity, yet I feel that their way of expressing their identities is more substantive than simply consuming Irish products.

I choose to further investigate these questions of tradition and authenticity, as enthusiasts construct their Irish identities based on parameters that are based on their perception of what these terms mean. I further explore how enthusiasts view the language as their most viable and legitimate expression, a symbolic form of their Irish ethnicities.

## Chapter Six: “I Want to Be All I Can Irish” Symbolic Ethnicity and Performing Irishness

On a Friday evening, at an immersion event I attended on the east coast, I stood with a group of ten or twelve event participants. It was the first night of this event and we were introducing ourselves to each other and making small talk. Following the orientation meeting, we each grabbed a beer, a soft drink, or a cup of coffee and stood around a table that overflowed with desert dishes and assorted snacks. Eventually, all of us grabbed chairs and arranged a circle around the fireplace. The crackling fire kept the place warm as it was early spring and still chilly outside. Everyone was engaged in conversation, telling stories and intently listening to others. It was fun, and I felt very much at home with this group of people, even though I had only just met them.

Our discussion was focused mainly on our Irish ancestry, the time commitment needed in learning such a difficult language, and questions about why we were learning Irish in the first place. Someone asked why I'd come all the way from Montana just to be there with them, a common question from a number of enthusiasts before, and I explained my research and my goal to better understand why people were learning Irish.

Although I had spoken with dozens of language enthusiasts over the previous ten months, it was Bryan, one of the individuals sitting across from me that evening, who was most curious as to why I was there. He wished to know what I had found out from all the others I encountered throughout my travels around the U.S.

and Canada. “Why are they learning Irish?” he asked me. I remember being stymied, not giving an answer really. Later, when I had time to reflect, I thought there seemed as many answers to this question as there were people learning the language (Fieldnotes in fc page 28).

The following day after language class, I asked Bryan if he would sit with me for a recorded interview. He seemed excited to tell me his story. He was in his mid-forties, had been recently married and had no children. He worked in retail and he described for me that he owned a shop, which he said consumed most of his time, but that he was able to take two or three vacations each year, which were always to Ireland.

He then told me of his passion for “being Irish,” something he reasoned must have come from his heritage: his great-grandfather was an immigrant from Cork, his father was a policeman “in [a] city...loaded with Irish police” (New York City), and perhaps most influential to him, he had strong tie to Catholicism. He thought that the “whole mixture just blended well together” resulting in something he found difficult to describe, but “we were Irish and kind of proud of that.”

His devotion to his faith had wavered in his early to mid-twenties, but having grown up with it, he decided to return to practicing Catholicism when he was thirty, and to him that meant “following all the traditions and going to Mass on Sunday and all of that.” His religious vocation helped instill confidence in that he was able to commit to something wholeheartedly, which, in turn, provided a foundation of sorts for what was to come: his infatuation with the Irish language, and all things Irish for that matter (Fieldnotes in fc pages 8–10).



When Bryan was in his early thirties, he told me, the extent to which he involved himself in Irish activities consisted of attending church regularly and volunteering to work on the local Saint Patrick's Day parade committee. It was not until his inaugural trip to Ireland with family members and friends that he experienced an awakening. He explained:

I really didn't decide to go until the last minute, and I went and: "My God!" it was just unbelievable. I got to see where my family came from and met some distant cousins...[a]nd to actually see them and talk to them and something clicked, and I became this Irish fanatic. So I mean...I just completely went crazy...joined anything Irish I could. (Fieldnotes in tir page 13, 22)

When I asked why his sudden interest in everything Irish, Bryan reasoned:

Ireland came at the right time in my life. If I [had visited] there maybe a few years earlier or later it may not have been the same. As far as life goes...I was kind of looking for something I think as well, and I found it with Ireland. At the point at where I was in my life, it just all came together perfectly...so it was just...it all worked out well. (Fieldnotes in tir page 13)

Bryan's period of introspection led immediately to his involvement in a number of organizations and activities, including membership in the Ancient Order of Hibernians (an Irish fraternal organization) and the Irish Genealogical Society, after which he said he was thrust into the role of "family genealogist," a job he relishes as relatives from both America and Ireland continually contact him for information.

But it was his relatively recent introduction to the language which he claimed as the most important of all his ethnic pursuits. He knew that Irish existed as a language and expressed amazement when he discovered that others, particularly

those who considered themselves to be Irish American, thought of it as simply a form of English with an accent.

“I became highly upset when I think how we [nearly] lost it,” he further explained, implying that the language was nearly extinct, yet he was candid in telling me that it was a struggle for him to learn, but he wished to be a fluent speaker someday. When comparing his language learning with all his other Irish activities, he felt strongly that it was “all them and ten times more,” as for him “[t]his is as close to Ireland as I feel I can get from where I’m at geographically [the East Coast of the U.S.]” For Bryan, as well as many others, learning Irish was a powerful means of expressing his ethnicity. “I want to be all I can Irish, I want to do everything I possibly can, and...I really feel that through the language you...can’t be anymore Irish than that, I mean, the language is everything” he proclaimed, and “I feel that if I want to be honest with myself and proud of my heritage, this [learning Irish] has to be done” (Fieldnotes in tir page 13, 22).

Bryan’s desire for being Irish, and in particular his enthusiasm for the Irish language was, I found, an affliction common to many of those I met at language events. He participated in a number of what he considered Irish activities such as his volunteer role at the local Catholic Church and his membership in the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) wherein he helped organize the local Saint Patrick’s Day parade. But it was his learning of the language and his association with those in his language group that he felt best symbolized his Irish identity.

My conversation with Bryan, as well with a number of others who shared similar ideas and participated in the same types of activities, prompted me to probe

deeper to answer questions with regard to how and why enthusiasts create an Irish identity, and also, how and why they create parameters for belonging to that identity. I begin by inspecting the work of sociologists, anthropologists, performance theorists, and geographers that explores concepts of symbolic and optional ethnicity, the development and construction of group parameters of identity, and the performance of these ethnicities.

I next show how language enthusiasts develop characteristics for their Irish identities by ranking cultural expressions. I first explain how event participants construct a divide between themselves—the aspiring-Irish, and those Irish who live their everyday lives in Ireland—the real-Irish. Then, I discuss how they further create a boundary between language users and non-language users in North America. The process of constructing boundaries and developing guidelines for belonging brings into focus how these same individuals come to define what is and is not considered traditional and authentic Irish culture.

Last, I investigate the concept of performance and how it contributes to the construction of identity amongst language enthusiasts. I look at two different streams of thought with regard to this approach. The first stems from the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 1963), as I view ethnicity being performed consciously as part of a social drama, while the second involves Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity that "outlines a process through which social subjects are produced through performance" (Gregory et al. 2009, 525). I end this section by showing how optional ethnicity, ethnic boundary construction, and performance come together under the contemporary idea of diaspora.

## Symbols and Options

As touched on in the preceding chapters, language enthusiasts practice what sociologist Herbert Gans calls a “symbolic ethnicity.” Gans (1979) reasoned that upwardly mobile, middle class, third-generation white ethnics maintain their ethnicities by choice. “The recent upward social, and centrifugal geographic, mobility of ethnics, particularly Catholics,” he writes, “has finally enabled them to enter the middle and upper middle classes, where they have been noticed by the national mass media, which monitor primarily these strata” (5).

A decade later, Mary Waters (1990) sought out a way to ground Gans’ ideas, and through her qualitative study of third- and fourth-generation white ethnics in two different communities in America, she discovered that they exercise what she labels “ethnic options” when “[p]eople who assert a symbolic ethnicity do not give much attention to the ease with which they are able to slip in and out of their ethnic roles.” In fact, “[i]t is quite natural to them that in the greater part of their lives, their ethnicity does not matter,” and yet they “take for granted that when it does matter, it is largely a matter of personal choice and a source of pleasure” (1990, 158; see also Alba 1990).<sup>41</sup>

Halter (2000, 9) similarly argues that for those wishing to maintain a link, ethnicity is retrievable on a moment’s notice because it is relatively free of the political, religious and cultural baggage prevalent for those white ethnics in past

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<sup>41</sup> In Mary Waters’ (1990) study, which included “in-depth interviews with sixty third- and fourth-generation white ethnics in suburban communities outside San Jose, California, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania” (11), she found that the most common reasons for why an individual chooses one ethnicity over another generally involves ancestral knowledge, surname, looks, and the relative rankings or popularity of particular ethnic groups.

generations. “In a society in which individualism is so highly valued, this type of ‘convenience’ or ‘portable’ ethnicity works very well. Third and fourth-generation upwardly mobile ethnics are now secure enough to proclaim their distinctiveness without risk of it becoming a hindrance to achieving middle-class respectability,” she explains, emphasizing that “[g]etting ahead financially and getting back to one’s cultural roots are perfectly compatible personal aspirations in America today” (10).

Historian Timothy Meagher (2005) reasons that this transition, from a group protectorate to an individual choice, is the result of an absence of religious, political, social or cultural difference. He writes,

[t]here [is] no way...to impose one version of Irish American identity on American people descended from Irish immigrants, for there [is] not authority to do so and no outside constraints forcing the compromises that solidarity in defense of Irish American interests had once demanded. There [are] no Irish American interests now, and therefore, there [are] many ways to be Irish American now as well, and they [are] all choices to be taken up or abandoned as personal need or desire required. (169)

A lack of any resistance from other ethnics, or from each other, is a strong argument for the exercising of a symbolic or optional ethnicity amongst the Irish in North America. Meagher thinks that because of this absence the reason for group solidarity was no longer needed.

Indeed, Waters (1990) proposes that, although a communal aspect of ethnicity exists which is rooted in one’s innate desire to belong and “is something that comes to you involuntarily through heredity,” ethnicity also involves a personal choice which “allows you to express your individuality in a way that does not make you stand out as in anyway different from all kinds of other people” (150). In other words, contemporary Irish ethnicity, similar to a number of other older ethnicities in

North America, becomes easier to express now that it lacks much of the negative stigmas of the past. So for those of the Irish diaspora in North America, their contemporary Irish identities are expressed without much resistance.

Ethnicity for whites is optional, and so is the way in which individuals choose to express it. But I further emphasize that, amongst language enthusiasts, boundaries are created between themselves, the Irish in Ireland, and all the other North Americans who similarly choose to be Irish even though they express their identities in other ways.

Anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969) addresses the concept of ethnic boundary construction in this way:

The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries.... The identification of another person as a fellow member of an ethnic group implies a sharing of criteria for evaluation and judgment... [and also] a dichotomization of others as strangers, as members of another ethnic group, implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgment value and performance and a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest. (15, his emphasis)

Furthering Barth's boundary thesis, sociologist Joane Nagel (1994) turned her attention to the "stuff" on the inside, agreeing that boundaries "are erected dividing some populations and unifying others," whereas "...the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality" are a means for constructing boundaries that are "...continuously negotiated, revised, and revitalized, both by ethnic group members themselves as well as by outside observers" (153).

Nagel (1994) argues that ethnic boundary construction provides a “structured” space which is continually defined and redefined by both inside and outside forces, yet she emphasizes that the forces of culture, reinforced by history, fill the inside of this space. She creatively equates ethnic culture to a shopping cart:

We can think of ethnic boundary construction as determining the *shape* of the shopping cart (size, number of wheels, composition, etc.); ethnic culture, then, is composed of the things we put into the cart—art, music, dress, religion, norms, beliefs, symbols, myths, customs. It is important that we discard the notion that culture is simply an historical legacy; culture is *not* a shopping cart that comes to us already loaded with a set of historical cultural goods.<sup>42</sup> Rather we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and present. (162, her emphasis)

This process of picking and choosing items in creating an individual’s ethnic shopping cart is, at least amongst a number of language enthusiasts, based on their establishing a hierarchy of cultural expressions. If the cart was labeled traditional and authentic Irishness, then the Irish language would be the primary ingredient.

Anthropologist Carol Trosset (1993), in her ethnographic study of the Welsh language in Wales, found that the “idea” of being Welsh to be based on a group-defined set of parameters of which language is thought to be the most important indicator of Welsh identity. “Welshness is defined in terms of a number of essential qualities which any individual may or may not possess,” and as such, she explains that “[p]eople dispute the relative importance of these essences, but the dominant view sees the Welsh language as the most important criterion defining Welsh identity,” and consequently “...it [the language] yields a hierarchy, in which some people...are ‘more Welsh’ than others” (54).

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<sup>42</sup> In chapter seven, I expand on this idea of heritage as a construction.

Choosing to be Irish amongst language enthusiasts is optional, and the ways they express or symbolize their Irish ethnicity are also selective. However, because of their idea that the language is the primary component of their symbolic ethnicities, they situate their Irish identities in a space somewhere in between the Irish in Ireland, and all the other Irish of the diaspora. I next look at how enthusiasts negotiate this position.

### **Situating Their Irishness**

How language enthusiasts come to choose their Irish ethnicity is based on a wide range of parameters. Some explained they had little choice but to be Irish, as they grew up in an Irish household, while others' choices were based on love of Irish music or dance. I next look at the variety of ways that enthusiasts came to consider themselves as Irish.

Clara, a language teacher who grew up and still lives in Boston, told me: “I went to a pajama party when I was about thirteen or so and I remember I was fascinated by my girlfriend’s father...because he had an American accent, and I thought it was very odd [laughs] because to me grownups had Irish accents” (Fieldnotes in tir page 3). She was a native of 1950s Boston, where she attended Catholic school surrounded by friends with Irish surnames. She was very fond of her growing up Irish in America, and therefore based her Irish identity on her neighborhood experiences, and, perhaps more influential, the stories from her Irish-born father told her while she was growing up.

Adam, a language teacher from the Midwest who grew up living next to his Irish grandparents, told me: “I thought of myself as Irish before I even thought of



myself as American. If someone would [ask]: ‘What are you?’ I’d say ‘Oh, I’m Irish!’” (Fieldnotes in tir page 34).

Similarly, John, a teacher of Irish now living in New York City, remembered growing up in Brooklyn: “... [M]y Irish grandfather was a very strong personality so...that was the identity that prevailed in our house” (Fieldnotes in trad page 22). Both Adam and John, despite the fact that they were third-generation Irish—having had Irish grandparents—were greatly influenced by their experiences of growing up in Irish-like households.

While some understood that their upbringing provided little if any alternative in their choice of ethnicity, others were confronted with more options, as Sarah, a language student from Wisconsin pointed out:

[I was]...lucky in a way that I’m not real mixed up, like a lot of Americans. I’m almost all Irish with a chunk of Swedish and a little tiny...one person married a German. That was it—all the way back. So I guess I’m lucky. But I think you know most Americans are a piece of this [or a piece of that] ...we’re all mixed up. (Fieldnotes in trad page 20)

Indeed, a majority of those with whom I spoke at language events told of an ancestry comprising a number of ethnicities, so their decision to express their Irish part was often ambiguous and not easily explained.

When I asked David and Rose, a couple I met in Esopus from New York, about ethnic choice, they answered in this way:

**Tom:** Why is it that [when an individual has] other Nationalities [as part of one’s ethnic makeup], like most of us do, that you would lean towards the Irish one?

**Rose:** Exactly! Yeah?

**David:** I don’t know...

**Rose:** You're all Irish [talking to David]. [Looking back at me] I'm Irish and Italian and my sister has absolutely no interest in the language or the culture, and...growing up...she had no interest. Whereas I was interested in the culture growing up, she was not. My mother is second generation [Irish]...if anything, my dad was the more dominant person in my life and he was the Italian one. And my dad was my soul mate, you know, the one that promoted everything, promoted education; yet it was the Irish culture that I was drawn to.... (Fieldnotes in gui page 62, 63)

For those who are all “mixed up” in their ancestries, choosing one ethnicity over another becomes a subjective process. For Rose her influence growing up was Italian, yet she chose the Irish part, not understanding why.

Others such as Denise, shared similar stories. “My mother is a McCarthy from Cork,” she claimed, “and...her whole family absolutely identifies as...100% Irish. Even though I've tried to point out to them that there's a little bit of Welsh and Cornish in there. They're: ‘No...no...no! It's all Irish [laughs]’” (Fieldnotes in trad page 14).

Despite the number of ways in which these enthusiasts were influenced toward their Irish side, an element of choice remained the important part of the equation. Bryan, who I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, summed up the optional nature of his Irish identity in this manner:

Every one of us *chose* this [referring to all the others at the immersion weekend]. You know a neighborhood group, we all live there, and a work group, we all work there, [but] who *chooses* to work with no financial gain? I *chose* to do this because it's a love you know, and so does everyone else here. There's nothing else. We're not gaining anything other than our love of Ireland and the heritage so.... Oh yeah, so this is by far my strongest group. (Fieldnotes in tir page 26, my emphasis)

My emphasis on Bryan's use of the word “chose” and “chooses” was the way most language enthusiasts came to identify with their Irish identities. The importance

of expressing his ethnicity in relation to the other, more obligatory duties in his life—work and helping out with his neighborhood group—in turn led to another important aspect of Gans’ and Waters’ symbolic and optional ethnicity—leisure time.

For some language enthusiasts such as Thomas, the time spent learning Irish took up an inordinate amount of time. His commitment to his employer and to spending time with his family required a regimented time frame in which to work on his language skills. He dabbled with other, less time-consuming expressions also, such as listening to the occasional pub session at a local pub and attending Irish-related lectures and Saint Patrick’s Day functions. He also listened to Irish-language tapes while walking back and forth to work each day, attended Irish-language class one night each week, and went to an occasional immersion weekend. Thomas’ goal was to become a fluent speaker. He further told me:

I wouldn’t have put the amount of time in, these years, [not] to become fluent in Irish and to continue to learn to. It’s not like there’s a point that you’ll get to and say: “Okay that’s it, I learned that, forget it,” and I’m off to something else. I envision it being something that [I] know until I pass on. It’s a part of my life, one of my interests.  
(Fieldnotes in pi page 10)

Thomas was committed to learning the language, but he also understood that this was only one of his interests, and he began to feel the weight of the commitment: “I was really fired up about it, and then the next thing you know is that I’m kind of almost dreading it.... It just got to be really tough to work all day long and then concentrate for three hours [in Irish class].... It surprised me how draining it was energy-wise and how hard it was to be prepared for class” (Fieldnotes in pi page 10). For some enthusiasts like Thomas, committing to the language alone, as well as a number of other Irish activities, was often difficult.

The amount of leisure time spent on cultivating an individual ethnic identity was often stifled by other important aspects of an individual's life. When I asked Bryan if any other of his family members were as interested in their Irish ancestry as he was, he replied that his sister, who tries to get to Ireland as frequently as she can, simply "does not have the time to dedicate to it," mostly because she has young children. He believed that if she "was ever at the point where she had to find something," referring to his own personal fulfillment, then perhaps she too would be equally as compelled (Fieldnotes in tir page 13).

Sarah explained to me that her recent interest in the language as something she came to later in life:

Well, you know how it is, ...you think about feeding your kids and taking care, and so that's basically what I did...all those years [when] about the only thing I did that was Irish [was playing] Irish music for my kids. Every Saint Patrick's Day, I would dance the Irish jig for them [laughs] which I learned in school. You know, just little things, but then we weren't involved in the Irish community at all.  
(Fieldnotes in trad page 16)

Mary described similar circumstances, claiming her re-connection to her Irish heritage could only be achieved after all the busywork of raising her children was over. "We only really got involved in the Irish stuff ten years ago," she said, "until then we were busy raising our kids and doing all the things that we were supposed to be doing. ...[T]hings started to free up about ten years ago as the kids got a little bit older" (Fieldnotes in trad page 6).

There were even a few language enthusiasts I met who grew up in Ireland learning Irish when they were young but stopped once they entered adulthood. Teddy, for example, moved to the Philadelphia-area in the 1970s following his

graduation from college. When I asked him why so long away from it? He told me: It “...just wasn’t a priority.” He got married, had children, and had a career. Now that the children were raised, he had more time on his hands and decided to come back to it (Fieldnotes in pp page 25).

Even though most enthusiasts claimed to be Irish, although for some through rather convoluted ancestries, their expressing of their identities through language use was thought to be symbolic of a traditional and authentic Irish identity. Although not native Irish, their identification with the language, among a number of other cultural expressions, demonstrated their occupation of an in-between Irish space located somewhere between the “real” or native Irish in Ireland, and those who are amongst the Irish diaspora in North America.

In Nash’s (2002) article “Genealogical Identities,” she writes of the Irish in North America, as well as in Australia and New Zealand, and how they use genealogy as a means to clarify and streamline the oftentimes conflicting and ambiguous nature of rootedness. In the article she writes of the author Rebecca Solnit (1997) and her book *A Book of Migrations: Some Passages in Ireland*:

She [Solnit] goes to Ireland to consider her sense of belonging in California to think about the ethnic choices of white Americans, and the assumptions of cultural affinity that Irish ancestry often provokes. By the end of her journey she gives up explaining her part-Jewish and part-Irish background, tired of defending her hybridity, and finds no firm foundation for her identity in Ireland. Instead, her visit confirms her sense that being of Irish extraction is *not* the same as being an inhabitant of Ireland. Ireland, instead, complicates the meanings of *native* and *home*. (37, her emphasis)

To Nash, Solnit at first anticipates, in her visit to Ireland, that she will be able to resolve her feelings of belonging to this faraway place based on her

knowledge that she possessed at least a portion of Irish ancestry. She returned with the recognition that she was not Irish, she was American, and that a gap truly existed between those who considered themselves to be part of the Irish diaspora and those Irish who lived their everyday lives as Irish citizens in Ireland.

Most language enthusiasts I studied were North American born and are citizens of Canada, or the U.S. Their proclamation of “being Irish” is based on the perception that they possess Irish ancestry, despite, as I have discussed previously, this connection being constructed from a number of selections.

Some enthusiasts were Irish-born and maintained citizenship in Ireland, yet even these individuals, who I include in my study, had lived for decades here in North America and had established families here with American-born children.

In order to delineate who was and was not “really” Irish, I looked to how enthusiasts positioned themselves in the Irish world and how they defined their own Irish identities. Indeed a divide was constructed between themselves and those in Ireland, yet I found that even this boundary was a negotiation. There was enough evidence to suggest that a distinction existed between those who I labeled aspiring-to-be Irish—“aspiring-Irish”—of the diaspora, and those who lived in Ireland and were rooted there—“real-Irish”—or natives. Used as a rough guideline, I further explored how enthusiasts then established guidelines for their aspiring-Irish identities.

When I first met Rose and David, whom I described before, I asked if their learning Irish made them feel more Irish than, say, those who claimed an Irish ancestry but knew little if any of the language:

**Rose:** ...I don't...well I personally don't...someone in Ireland doesn't consider me Irish, so I'm not Irish.

**David:** According to them I'm American [and]...of course I am.

**Rose:** ... [B]ut I [do] feel more authentically Irish than someone in America with Irish roots [who does] not speak the language.

**David:** Well, you see, in my mind I've always been Irish because when I grew up we were told we were Irish [laughs]. ...When you go to Ireland sometimes...well, you're American. And the first time you hear that you're...: 'Oh.' Because everyone here is...American, and something-else type-thing. (Fieldnotes in rd page 75-76)

Rose and David saw themselves as Americans with Irish roots, but not Irish.

In fact, David was second-generation Irish, as both of his parents came from Ireland, yet he still felt he was an American. Rose placed herself between the real-Irish in Ireland and those who do not speak the Irish language here in North America. She felt that she was more Irish than those who did not know the language, therefore situating herself in an in-between space: more Irish than non-language speakers of the diaspora, yet not Irish enough to be considered native or real-Irish.

Bryan claimed to be third-generation Irish on his father's side. When I asked about his travels to Ireland and how he was perceived by his Irish in-laws, he answered:

We're [everyone living in America with Irish descent] probably...we're Irish American. We're probably all similar. They [meaning the Irish in Ireland] don't understand that in the least bit. They laugh at us [he is referring to learning Irish]. But...I mean...they know that they're from Ireland—their grandparents [were born there]. ...They know this. It doesn't matter to them. To me, I...think it's important and I like to know that. They always have been in Ireland. (Fieldnotes in trad page 11)

Bryan positioned himself between being real-Irish and aspiring-Irish both spatially and genetically, spatially in the sense that he did not live in Ireland, whereas

his in-laws did—“they have always been in Ireland”—and genetically, due to their having a long and direct lineage to the land. For them, their being Irish is taken-for-granted—“it doesn’t matter to them”—but for Bryan, he felt that his being Irish involved much more work and commitment in order to maintain this link (see also my dialogue with Bryan to open up this chapter). For him, his use of the language, however, was the best way to produce and reinforce this connection, despite his relatives finding humor in his use of Irish.

So, while for some enthusiasts there was a definitive boundary between the real- and aspiring-Irish, others felt the boundary is less distinguishable. When I asked Denise if her being a fluent speaker made her feel “more Irish” than say others who were not learning the language, she answered me by saying:

I don’t bother myself with it too much...because I don’t think we will ever understand what it’s not.... I mean, I don’t identify myself as Irish. [I]f somebody [asks]: “What are you?” “I’m American.” I’ll say I’ve got Irish roots, but I guess I do get a little annoyed with people who are Americans and say: “Oh I’m Irish.” Well you’re not *really* Irish, you know [laughs]. I guess...I can understand how the *pure* Irish are you know...the *native* Irish are like: “No you’re not! What are you talking about?” On the other hand, I think there needs to be a little bit more give and take for them [Irish in Ireland] to realize that we’re not that far removed from those traditions and that if you feel that way, and you’re doing the same thing they’re doing... there’s such a tie there and I know they recognize it. They certainly talk about it a lot. (Fieldnotes in trad page 16, my emphasis)

I emphasize Denise’s use of the words “really”, “pure”, and “native” in order to demonstrate how she made a distinction between those who possess Irish ancestry here and those who are Irish in Ireland. Similar to Rose and David above, Denise said she was not “really” Irish, she was American, and, in fact, went so far as to say she was annoyed by those here who claimed to be Irish. By being pure and



native, Denise implied an element of essentialism, as if the Irish in Ireland are biologically linked to the land, whereas we in America do not have that direct connection.

However, Denise eased back on her position towards the end of the quote, when she proclaimed that the Irish in Ireland needed to better understand that the difference between those who are aspiring-to-be Irish and those real-Irish in Ireland was minimal. Since our two cultures are nearly the same, she felt very little difference existed between our identities.

At the other extreme, Jeff, who was a Canadian language teacher, went so far as to say that there was no difference at all, especially with regard to use of the language. He provided the following scenario:

“Oh, I’m a set dancer. I’m familiar with Irish culture,” [and] someone ...coming from Ireland [might] say: “We don’t do that in Ireland, that’s not really Irish, that’s history, that’s something else.” So you never really get yourself on a par with...what’s really authentic. But once you’re into the Irish language, if anybody wants to criticize that, well start criticizing it in Irish and then we’ll talk...and then you’ll find that we’re really friends, but...if you’re not speaking Irish then...you know and I know that you haven’t got any room to negotiate here.... (Fieldnotes in tir page 81)

Whether enthusiasts situate their identity as that on par with the real-Irish, like Jeff, or distinctly separate, such as David and Bryan, or somewhere in-between, as envisioned by Rose and Denise, their use of the language is considered the primary ingredient for symbolizing their Irish identity. I next look at how the aspiring-Irish develop group parameters of belonging within the diasporic community through their performance of the language.

I found how the aspiring-Irish created a border between themselves and all the other aspiring-Irish of the North American diaspora. Trosset (1993) further writes that “[t]hinking about the many things I had heard about identity and the language, I sometimes felt tempted to draw up checklists of relative degrees of Welshness” (23). “To live in the medium of the Welsh language is the requirement for being properly Welsh...” (23), she writes, finding that the language is thought, by Welsh speakers anyway, to be the highest symbol of an individual’s ethnic identity in Wales.

While sitting at a table with a group of language learners while at a language event on the East Coast, I overheard someone bring up the term “Shamrock Brigade.” Curious, I asked what this term meant:

**Sean:** ...Americans with their leprechauns and all...they don’t see that it’s...

**Declan:** We laugh at the Shamrock Brigades. [laughing]

**Sean:** Well...I don’t think anybody here tonight [at the language event] is part of the Shamrock Brigade.

**Sharon:** I don’t even know what the Shamrock Brigade is...”

**Sean:** He means the ones that...on St. Paddy’s Day...everybody’s Irish.

**Declan:** [Yeah]...never been to Ireland.  
[Everyone begins talking now about who they know might be in the Shamrock Brigade]

**Peter** [looking at me]: That’s what I mean by Professional Irish.  
[More discussion about the Brigade]

**Sean:** I think...I think we’re all well beyond that. Anyone that’s...that’s here tonight, I mean....

**Peter:** Oh yeah. (Fieldnotes in tir page 11)

The idea that those learning Irish felt they were “well beyond” all the others who only celebrated their ethnicity on one day of the year, implied that learning Irish for these individuals was for them a penultimate symbol of Irish identity. An individual, who is “Professional Irish,” I was told, exhibited the following characteristics: “[Y]ou celebrate Saint Patrick’s Day. You claim you’re Irish, but that’s it. You know nothing about the land, the language, and the culture except for what you...the *Quiet Man* movie...that’s your definition of Ireland...is the *Quiet Man* <sup>43</sup> (Fieldnotes in pi page 122).

While in upstate New York at the *Daltaí na Gaeilge* Irish-language week, for example, I spoke with Douglas, a fluent-speaker from the New York City area. He explained to me that differences existed between those of us here at the language event and the individuals attending a nearby Irish festival in Kingston, New York. He reasoned that:

[u]nless you’re a participant in the [dance] competition, ...most of those people don’t have a very deep exposure to the culture and the language, so [their]... interest in Irish things is fairly casual, [but]...people that are into the dance or into the history, they’re...roughly comparable to what we’re doing. I wouldn’t call somebody who is into the history or politics or the dance thing...“casual,”... [but] it’s a bit different from what we’re doing. (Fieldnotes in trad page 23, 24)

The language, for Douglas, required more dedication and commitment than simply attending an Irish festival. Yet he positioned the dancers, along with those interested in exploring Irish history, as being nearly on the same level as language

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<sup>43</sup> *The Quiet Man* (1952) is a romantic comedy directed by John Ford and starring John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara. It is about an Irish-American boxer going back to his homeland and falling in love.

enthusiasts. To him, learning Irish was “...harder than anything else,” as “[i]t involves more of you, more of your personality than studying the literature or the history and the politics. I guess the people who are into...dance and music are closest to us...but still somehow different” (Fieldnotes in trad page 24).

Sarah saw the language as “the” primary indicator of Irish culture. “I just think that the language is the heart of the whole culture, and without the language...what do you have, a bunch of people who came from the same piece of land, and that’s it!” she explained, emphasizing the importance of the Irish language in delineating one culture from another and the primary link to territory (Fieldnotes in trad page 20).

Adam thought that the language formed the foundation for his Irish identity: “I sort of looked at it myself, [and] I just sort of thought ‘Man. That’s [language] sort of like, in some ways, the essence of Irishness,’ and to not study it is to ignore that which it really is. And in favor of what? I’d long since lost any interest in...a St. Patrick’s Day thing...in, I can’t tell you, two decades easily” (Fieldnotes in trad page 3).

While Denise explained that her being an Irish speaker “gives you a little bit more credibility” because others realize “that you’ve taken the time to learn the language and you’re not just putting green shamrocks up on Saint Patrick’s Day.... You have a little bit more of an entrée than you might otherwise have...” (Fieldnotes in gg page 1).

For some, learning the language and becoming a fluent speaker was less about a ranking of cultural expressions and more a concern about satisfying a deeper

sense of belonging to a perceived Irish ancestry. Finn, an East Coast enthusiast, spoke to me about the importance of the Irish language in his life; for him it was “...a chance to complete the picture,” as in “...the more you get into it, [the more you] get reaffirmed really, that it is good, that it has value, that ...despite what you might have read, when you were a kid, in a book...about what a poor pathetic country it [was, that] there is a lot more to the story, and it’s got a wonderful history and it’s just...you want to be a part of that (Fieldnotes in pi page 79).

“I want to speak the Irish language...I want to understand something deep about...where I’ve come from and history wasn’t doing it for me,” explained Jeff, “it’s not a coincidence that I turned to the...music and the language at the same time because these are all codes...they’re all ways of understanding more deeply what you are on the spiritual level.” Jeff, like Finn, stressed that his reason for learning Irish was more to compensate for his lack of being grounded, and that Irish history, music, and above all, the language, were his way to connect (Fieldnotes in trad page 11, 12).

Amongst enthusiasts, boundaries were established based on the value they placed on language acquisition. Although a passive construction, as I found no one discouraged others from participating in what they considered less-traditional or authentic activities (in fact nearly all enjoyed being involved in a number of other activities—including Saint Patrick’s Day celebrations), the creation of an aspiring-Irish identity, symbolized by language use, was for many something of more substance; it was an ingrained part of their identity. In this sense, I next turn to the concept of performance in exploring whether an aspiring-Irish identity is created

from something that involves a sub- or unconscious process, when enthusiasts live an identity based on the repetitive nature of perceived ancestral traits.

### **Performing Ethnicity**

Participants at language events come voluntarily, as many are drawn to the language through a number of activities—music, dance, genealogy. While some are only able to attend a language event once each year, others learn the language in class every week and meet with friends to converse, rarely missing an immersion event. For some, and I use myself as an example, our Irish identities are lived in a piecemeal fashion; rather, the extent of my Irish identity encompasses writing about Irish identity, attending an occasional immersion event, going to the Montana Irish festival, and drinking a few pints of Guinness with friends at the local Irish pub—Sean Kelly’s.

Keeping in mind the various ways enthusiasts maintain their identities, I wish to continue my discussion from chapter four, where I described “places (or sites) of performance.” Yet rather than consider the relationship between performance and space, I instead explore how enthusiasts go about performing their Irish identities by discerning those markers, norms, and practices that help define an individual’s identity. What I wish to demonstrate is how I see specific ethnic identifiers being performed through two different approaches of performance theory—the conscious and unconscious—that I next describe in more detail (Pratt 2009a; see also Gregson and Rose 2000; Thrift 2000b; Pratt 2000, 2009b).

Geographer Geraldine Pratt (2009a) lists four ways “performance” is used by scholars to understand concepts of human agency, subjectivity, and power: the

“sociological dramaturgical approach, performativity (often as outlined by [Judith Butler), non-representational theory and performance studies” (525). In this section, I will touch on the first two, emphasizing “performativity” as it relates to the construction of Irish identities amongst language enthusiasts.

The sociological dramaturgical approach, which comes from the work of sociologist Irving Goffman (1959), shows, through the use of metaphor, how “[s]ocial life is conceived as staged by conscious agents who adhere to scripts” (Pratt 2009a, 525). Goffman emphasizes social interaction as a result of an “active, prior, conscious, and performing self,” (Gregson and Rose 2000, 433) and therefore these performances entail role playing and the following of scripts based on norms and practices created through social, economic, political, and cultural processes (Pratt 2009a, 525; see also P. Crang 1994; McDowell and Court 1994).<sup>44</sup>

However, “[w]hereas the dramaturgical analogy implies a conscious agent that exists prior to performances,” writes Pratt (2009; citing Gregson and Rose 2000), “performativity outlines a process through which social subjects are produced through performances” themselves (525). Performativity, largely influenced by the feminist theorist Judith Butler’s (1990) work on gender, is “[i]n contrast to some accounts of social performances, [where] those [social performances are] analyzed as performative...[and] are not seen to be freely chosen.... Performances are also historically embedded; they are ‘citational chains’ and their effect is dependent on

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<sup>44</sup> Performance studies and theatre arts scholar Marvin Carlson (1996) credits Richard Schechner from theatre, Victor Turner and Dwight Conquergood from anthropology, and Erving Goffman from sociology, as individuals who were most influential in developing the basis for the contemporary study of performance.

conventions.... Norms and identities are instantiated through repetitions of an ideal (e.g. the ideal of ‘woman’ or ‘man’)” (Pratt 2009b, 527).

In other words, some aspects of our identities are a result of the repetitiveness of practices over time; indeed, their being historically embedded and citational means that they have precedent. Catherine Nash (2000) explains how Butler’s work “is an attempt to find a more embodied way of rethinking the relationships between determining social structures and personal agency” when “sedimented forms of gendered social practices...become so routinized as to appear natural” (654, 655). In other words, cultural performances—as Nash describes Butler’s work with gender—are created over time through the process of repetition, when at some point in our lives these practices transcend from conscious thoughts to unconscious habits. These habits are citational in nature, in how they emulate or build off of a specific act or action as if from a point of reference.

Gregson and Rose (2000) suggest that “performance—what individual subjects do, say, ‘act-out’—and performativity—the citational practices which reproduce and/or subvert discourse and which enable and discipline subjects and their performances—are intrinsically connected...” (434). At language events, I witnessed and listened to individuals acting out aspects of their Irish identities through their participation in activities—the language class, the Catholic mass, the March, the *sean nós* singing, and the dance *céilí*. Additionally, as my dialogue with enthusiasts revealed, and as I wrote previously in this chapter, many enthusiasts like Bryan, David, Rose, Denise, Sarah, and Jeff wished to reproduce a perceived notion of what they felt constituted real or authentic Irishness.



For many enthusiasts the adoption of perceived Irish attributes, such as the Irish language, was a self-conscious process, for example when Bryan told me he wished to “be all I can Irish, I want to do everything I possibly can...” (see the beginning of this chapter), he was knowingly learning the language because for him it symbolized the most important attribute of his Irish identity. Bryan was playing a role, but concurrently he equated language use as the primary means of being Irish which could or could not become a habitual performance.

When enthusiasts’ Irish identities become performative, their ethnic performances become less self-conscious. One example of performativity in this context was how some enthusiasts adopted stereotypes. Emily, the young woman I met at the Milwaukee Irish Festival, explained:

Like, you’re learning it [Irish], it’s just...it’s more for your own. It’s not...it’s more for your own benefit that you’re doing it. It’s not to show the world that you’re Irish. And then, I think this is more like the subtle kind of...[laughs] you know like...you’re Irish, you’re quiet, you’re not necessarily quiet, but you know what I mean...you’re learning it [the language] [and] it’s just...it’s more for your own. ...[Y]ou are Irish and you are learning about who you are instead of doing what everybody says is Irish. But yet, because some of those things are just so ingrained, it’s like: “What is Irish? And what isn’t?” And that’s the thing about Irish people, it’s kind of like, they are always adapted to everything. (Fieldnotes in eim page 3, 4 and trad page 21)

Emily felt she was learning the Irish language not to show others that she was Irish, but more for her own satisfaction. Yet her act of learning Irish is itself playing a role, albeit only as she claims for herself. Additionally, when at the end of her brief narrative she implies that her being “adaptable to everything” is a trait of the Irish—a trait that she possesses—this is a practice that she has chosen to adopt and subsequently act out. In the process of becoming habitual and unreflexive, a

purposefully performed Irish identity becomes, in part, a culturally mediated but subconsciously performative practice.

I felt that enthusiasts worked to design their Irish identities both through an adoption of specific traits consciously and through habitual or citational practices developed over time. Progression from the self-conscious action of role playing—for example when on one occasion I was told by a young woman who I met in Ontario that she sometimes imitated an Irish brogue in front of strangers when she felt like being Irish—to the less conscious and more habitual practice of adopting and performing stereotypical traits, for example, demonstrates the process of the performative in the construction of an ethnicity.

Challenging, however, is how a number of words I used throughout this dissertation—choice, voluntary, optional, and flexible—seem to me to reflect the opposite of those words I listed above used by scholars in describing performance and performativity—habitual, citational, and sedimented. The fluid and dynamic nature of ethnic choice, and the development of specific attributes of Irishness by language enthusiasts, may at first seem to support the idea that these identities are fleeting, ephemeral, and perhaps even artificial. Even my previous description of being “aspiring-Irish” denotes an air of something temporary.

Yet, despite the fact that our Irish ethnicities are constructed from a number of options and choices, the origins of many of these norms and practices, however, must come from somewhere and therefore, I would argue, are built from habitual or citational practices.

In this chapter I argued that language enthusiasts exercised a symbolic and optional ethnicity, developing their Irish identities from perceptions that their use of the language situated them in a space somewhere between the real-Irish in Ireland and the non-language users of the diaspora. Language also became a symbol of a perceived traditional and authentic Irish identity. The establishment of an Irish identity amongst language enthusiasts is built on perceptions. In the next few chapters, I further explore how enthusiasts construct their identities through heritage and an imagined connection to place.

## Chapter Seven: Constructing Heritage Personal Narratives of Irishness

“My great-grandfather Daniel Sullivan founded Shelby, Montana, and my great-grandmother Jane was the first white woman to live in the Marias River country,” I would often say, uttering this phrase whenever I wished for others to know of my “native Montanan” status. Furthermore, it was my great-great-grandparents, Michael and Nora, who came from County Cork in Ireland, migrating to the once small town of Malden, Massachusetts, in 1844, now part of north Boston. I know very little of their time in Ireland, but the year they left is highly symbolic—I am a descendent of the Famine Irish who migrated by the millions during that time in history. Knowing their story, from when they landed in America to my experiences with the Sullivan’s while growing up, is where my heritage began to take shape.

History books and genealogical tracings, traditions, and stories told by relatives contribute to my family narrative. My great-grandparents set out by wagon for Iowa County, Wisconsin, in 1850, where, for nearly sixteen years, Michael was a farmer and miner before moving on to Montana in 1865. Mining was an occupation in the Beare Peninsula in Cork, and the Irish chain migrated— where generations of families settled together in specific towns or neighborhoods (Meagher 2005)— westward to a number of mining towns. Many Sullivans ended up in Butte, Montana, (A.W. Bowen and Co. 1902, 1829; also see Emmons 1990 on the Butte Irish; and Meagher 2005, regarding chain-migration).

Daniel, my great-grandfather, was born in Malden in 1848, and moved with his parents to Wisconsin and on to Montana. While in his late teens and early twenties, he prospected and mined near Diamond City, a small gold-rush town in the Big Belt Mountains just to the southeast of Helena, eventually buying a ranch in the Missouri River valley which he farmed and raised cattle for the next four to five years. He supplemented his earnings by running a bulltrain (supply wagon) further north into and out of Butte. In 1883 Daniel moved a few hundred miles north to Birch Creek in Teton County where, according to historians, he “worked a squatter’s claim until 1885, when he located his present ranch four and one-half miles from the head of the Marias River, and eighteen miles from Shelby,” today a gas and oil town located in north central Montana (A.W. Bowen and Co. 1902, 1829).<sup>45</sup>

Stories I remembered hearing as a child at family reunions included that of my great-grandfather’s idea of building a hotel near his ranch, where he calculated the soon-to-be intersection of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific Railroad lines. At this site, located on the Marias River, he eventually built the Sullivan Hotel, which according to family folklore, led to his founding of the town of Shelby, Montana.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> My great-grandfather Daniel’s short biography was written in the book entitled *Progressive Men of The State of Montana* (1902), as well as another text called *Montana: It’s Story and Biography* (1921).

<sup>46</sup> Yet it may not necessarily have happened exactly that way; according to a short blurb on Shelby’s tourist website: “Shelby is a county seat named for Peter P. Shelby, general manager of the Montana-Central Railroad,” and the town “came into existence in 1891 when the Great Northern was forging across the prairie towards Marias Pass” when “the builders threw off a boxcar at the crosstrails in the coulee and called it a station” (<http://russell.visitmt.com/communities/Shelby> (last

Descendants of the Famine Irish, and staunchly Catholic, Daniel and Jane had thirteen children, my grandfather Edward (most called him Bob) was one of these, and while in his 20s, Bob married an Irish-immigrant woman, Anna Clarke, who also came from Wisconsin to the Kalispell area in northwestern Montana. Together they had eleven children, the ninth being my father Daniel.

Our Sullivan family tree spreads out much like the branches of a giant oak tree, rooted in traditions of Catholicism, the Democratic Party, and of course, Ireland. I am fifth-generation Irish (fourth-generation American), my great-great grandparents Michael and Nora being first-generation Irish, yet these stories of the past form an integral part of my personal history—my heritage. According to David Lowenthal (1998), “[h]eritage is not our sole link with the past. History, tradition, memory, myth, and memoir variously join us with what has passed, with forebears, with our own earlier selves.” But, he continues, we produce our heritage by collecting and combining these various “modes of retrieval” yet “neither history nor tradition ever commanded the ubiquitous reach that heritage has today” (3).

I, like many other language enthusiasts, possess a number of these stories, myths, and traditions, which, in turn, help me to construct my version of the Sullivan-family narrative. Quite often my heritage is built from embellishments and romanticized versions of history, as exemplified through my attempt to piece together my father’s childhood. About him, I was told very little, only that he grew up poor and destitute. Unlike many other Irish growing up in America in the 1920s, my grandparents were not city people, they were ranchers and miners, not living in

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accessed 12 July 2009)). Regardless of these claims and according to our family narrative, Daniel was the founder of Shelby.

tenements, but in farmhouses. My grandfather was a drifter, often moving the large family each year around places in western Montana, as well as moving for a brief stint in Berkeley, California. He was mostly a part-time ranch hand, and as stories have it, a full-time alcoholic. It seemed my grandmother's life was that of a bearer of children, as she had nearly as many miscarriages as she had living children.

My mother once told me that my grandmother "was in her sixties, but looked all of ninety," and she recalled some of my father's stories of when he spent much of his childhood moving, settling briefly in the ranch towns of Plains, and Hot Springs, Montana, as well as in the booming mining towns of Anaconda and Phillipsburg, where he eventually graduated from high school in 1948. My Aunt Janey, who was closet in age to my father, said she was always by his side when he was forced to fight the toughest kid in school whenever they moved to a new place.

My father died when I was twenty, before I was interested in knowing more about his past. I am instead forced to rely on the memories of those who grew up with him, as well as my own personal experiences and a scattering of things written down, such as letters to my mother, his high school yearbook, old photographs, building plans he drew, and the scribbles that I found in some of his college textbooks. Much of his story is gone, buried with him, and all of his siblings who have since passed on.

However, I do recognize now how he nurtured his Irish identity, albeit in subtle ways. Besides his attending Catholic mass each Sunday, he maintained a tight groups of friends—Callahan, Dailey, and Combo—all of Irish descent, and the

extended Sullivan family—in which I am the youngest of over forty first-cousins—remained an important part of his life.

Why I waited fifteen years after his death in the mid-1990s to think more seriously about my Irish heritage is baffling to me. I, along with many enthusiasts, try to explain my more recent interest in language, and other things Irish, as a means for connecting the past with the present, bridging a gap, or satisfying some deep sense of belonging. “Beleaguered by loss and change, we keep our bearings only by clinging to remnants of stability,” writes geographer David Lowenthal (1998, 6), noting that the meaning of heritage itself has drastically changed over the past fifty years as “...book titles and indexes suggest, heritage dwelt mainly on heredity, probate law, and taxation; it now features antiquities, roots, identity, [and] belonging” (4, 5).

In this chapter I explore the importance of heritage as an integral component in the construction of an individual Irish identity. I begin by showing how geographers, historians, and others define the concept of heritage as well as how the meaning of the word has evolved within the geographic literature. I further emphasize the ways these same scholars expose how heritage is used to influence how people develop parameters of identity and place.

Next, I share stories from a number of language enthusiasts that reveal the ways they construct their Irish heritage. I organize these narratives generationally, according to how far-removed enthusiasts are from the migration experience. First-generation Irish, for example, describe their personal tales of migration, whereas those who are second-generation Irish and beyond rely on accounts that are passed down through family narratives. I found that individuals that occupy the same



generational cohort construct heritage in similar ways using like sources; moreover, different cohorts develop a heritage which is influenced by different situations at different times.

Finally, I look to see how the construction of heritage fits with the contemporary idea of diaspora. Heritage is thought by a host of scholars to be an invention, produced from extraordinary events in the past. Yet enthusiasts are more concerned with establishing a link between their past and the present than with worrying about the possibility that their narratives are trivialized or fictional. In essence, heritage for these individuals is a dynamic process used to legitimize a fixed notion of identity.

### **Heritage and Ethnicity**

What is heritage? Dictionaries define heritage by using words such as inheritance, legacy, birthright, tradition, or by referring to it as a “thing” being passed down through the generations or having been acquired from a predecessor—each implying a link to the past.<sup>47</sup> Lowenthal (1998) begins the introduction to his book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, by writing:

All at once heritage is everywhere—in the news, in the movies, in the marketplace—in everything from galaxies to genes. It is the chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure of tourism. One can barely move without bumping into a heritage site. Every legacy is cherished. From ethnic roots to history theme parks, Hollywood to the Holocaust, the whole world is busy lauding—or lamenting—some past, be it fact or fiction. (xiii)

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<sup>47</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1981) and *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (2004), <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Heritage> (last accessed 12 August 2009).

Indeed, heritage is used in a number of ways to describe a historic event influenced by cultural, social, political, and economic forces.

In contemporary geography, the definition of heritage is that of a social construction, an integral part of an individual or a group identity used in establishing a connection to place. Brian Graham, G.J. Ashworth, and J.E. Tunbridge (2000) explain:

Places are distinguished from each other by many attributes that contribute to their identity and to the identification of individuals and groups within them. Heritage is one of these attributes. The sense, or more usually senses, of place is both an input and an output of the process of heritage creation. Geography is concerned with the ways in which the past is remembered and represented in both formal or official senses and within popular forms, and the implications which these have for the present and for ideas and constructs of belonging. (4)

Heritage is an integral component in legitimizing and reinforcing claims to place. Geographers more recently set about discounting essentialist notions used in linking ethnicity to place by looking at how history is modified and manipulated for the purpose of maintaining specific agendas such as nation building or the promotion of attractions. “We are not concerned, therefore, with whether one piece of heritage is historically more correct, intrinsically authentic, innately valuable or qualitatively more worthy than another,” write Graham et al. (2000), rather “[i]f people in the present are the creators of heritage, and not merely passive receivers of it, then the present creates the heritage it requires and manages it for a range of contemporary purposes” (2).

The idea of heritage as an invention or a manipulated form of history is widely accepted amongst a host of geographers. Additionally, Lowenthal (1998)

argues that heritage ignores spatial scale, as “[a]ll of us—as individuals, as nations, as ethnic and other entities—adapt the past to our presumed advantage. Such acts undeniably deform history for heritage aims, and heritage is further corrupted by being popularized, commoditized, and politicized” (87). He also acknowledges that heritage is often a tool used by those in power for the purpose of political or economic gain.

The reasons for creating and engaging with heritage are numerous, and many geographers investigate the process of heritage production in the context of nationalism and tourism, when in fact those who are in power can “...often sanitise local [or national] histories, seldom focusing on their controversial, uncomfortable or mundane aspects but celebrating their notable, distinctive elements instead” writes David Atkinson (2005, 141-142), and many times the result of these heritages becomes an exclusionary practice.

Atkinson’s idea that heritage is a tool for enhancing the special while at the same time minimizing the mundane is an important aspect of the process. While attempting to represent a collective form of identity, stories often mask “plural, complex and diverse histories beneath one-dimensional narratives; they can elide the broader spatial connections of places via these fixed heritage representations, rooted in bounded sites” (142). Whether for the purpose of inventing a history for unifying a nation, selling to tourists a specific form of history for financial gain, or used as a means for bringing together ethnic groups, heritage often covers up the mundane aspects of history, in turn embellishing the distinctive parts.

Regarding nationalism, geographer Nuala Johnson (2005) describes how the nation-state is a relatively new and modern concept that uses heritage as a tool for promoting unity. Heritage is produced from “a collective cultural inheritance that spans centuries,” she writes, and group identities are maintained “by highlighting the historical trajectory of the cultural group through preservation of elements of the built environment, through spectacle and parade, through art and craft, [and] through museum and monument” (315; also see Anderson 1991). Not only does heritage “highlight” or enhance particular parts of history for the purpose of uniting a number of divergent groups under one nation, but this is accomplished through a number of avenues, from the construction of statues and museum exhibits to the production of ephemeral events such as festivals and parades.

“In this conceptualization of a political state that is also the homeland of a single, homogeneous people, heritage is a primary instrument in the ‘discovery’ or creation and subsequent nurturing of a national identity” write Graham et al. (2000, 12), explaining the connection between nationalism and ethnicity. Graham et al. further argue that this bond can be stronger than that of class, gender, or religion, through a firm belief that everyone shares a common kinship or ancestry that is ruled by a self-governing state, and a historical claim to territory (2000; see also Johnson 1993; Mitchell 2000; Wiebe 2002; Agnew 2004).

While in some cases, heritage is constructed in order to facilitate the unification of groups of people who live within a territory under the auspice of nationalism, it can also be used as a means for linking those who live outside of the nation, the diaspora, to a perceived ancestry and home place. Nash (2003b) writes

that “national identities are conventionally expressed in terms of the shared possession of a culture and heritage within a bounded territory.” Yet taken a step further, “[e]thnicities whether they coincide with, are contained within, or override nation-state borders, are similarly constructed through ideas of collective ownership of shared culture heritage and especially shared ancestry” (181).

Nash’s (2002) study, which includes those of third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation Irish “settler” groups residing in North America, New Zealand and Australia, shows how genealogy is used as a way for individuals to establish an ancestral link to Ireland that fulfils a personal need of belonging. She “considers genealogy as a practice through which ideas of personal, familial, collective, ethnic, and sometimes national sense of culture, location, and identity are shaped, imagined, articulated, and enacted,” and she further “explore[s] the ways in which genealogy can be a personal engagement with, as well as a retreat from, difficult questions of identity, ethnicity, and belonging, and can be mobilised both in reaction to anxieties about changing patterns of national identity and to reimagine the nation as a plural ‘diasporic space’” (28).

I mention Nash’s work to demonstrate how heritage is an important component of identity construction for those who are part of the Irish diaspora. Genealogy is one way in which an individual can construct a connection to a perceived home place that transcends national borders and provides him or her with powerful feelings of belonging without having to live in that place. I argue that the Irish language is used in a similar manner. I next show the ways language enthusiasts

construct heritage as a means for linking identity to place, as the following narratives suggest.

### **Producing a Personal Heritage**

Language enthusiasts connected to their Irish past through a variety of means. While some traced their genealogy to relatives who they subsequently reacquainted with in Ireland, others relied on family stories that were passed down through the generations both orally and in written form. My story showed how I constructed my heritage from a point in time when my great-great-grandparents came from Ireland and settled north of Boston. From that point forward I relied on my memory of the stories told of my father and grandfather at family reunions, my reading of history books, and other bits and pieces of history I gathered over the years.

Memory for the group was an important component of heritage construction. “When [my mother] Sara turned these memories into the stories that she told me when I was a child, I fell fully under their sway and made them my own. I knew nothing about Ireland,” writes historian Richard White (1998), when describing his childhood, “I entered into my mother’s stories so fully that I am not sure now whether I remember my mother’s stories about a place that I had never seen or my own combinations of the stories,” and “[p]ossessed by these stories, I imagined that events of such power, so powerfully told, must have been witnessed” even though his mother was only an infant at the time (31).

White, a well-known historian, came to understand how these stories of his ancestors that were told to him by his Irish-born mother were largely fictionalized

and embellished. He acknowledges in his book *Remembering Abanagran: a history of stories* (1998), how difficult it was for him to accept that these narratives were not historic facts, but rather fictionalized accounts of actual occurrences. Yet they remained for him a means for remaining connected to his Irish ancestors and Ireland itself. “I live,” he writes, “in a way probably only other historians can fully appreciate, in this junkyard of the past. I haul pieces into the present, and there they confront my mother’s memories” (21). White finds it difficult to blend the factual history of his ancestors with the powerful, albeit fictionalized, narratives received from his mother. Similarly, Irish-language enthusiasts of all generations make their heritage from a patchwork of sources.

While at a language event in Milwaukee, I spoke with Sam, a language instructor living in County Mayo in Ireland. He told me he often came to the States and Canada to teach Irish at workshops and immersion events. “I was brought up in an Irish-speaking family in the *Gaeltacht*,” he told me, “where my father and mother were both native speakers and their Irish was a lot better than their English.” He further explained how he had heard English for the first time when he went to boarding school in the early- to mid-1960s. Since the village he grew up in was small, the school was centrally located amongst a number of small communities—roughly forty miles from his home—so he would stay there all week long coming home only on the weekends (Fieldnotes in gui page 9).

Stories from those like Sam, who were raised in Ireland living in Irish-speaking households, symbolized a heritage that was created from narratives produced through direct experience as Irish speakers. Sam was “real-Irish,” and

therefore his heritage was built from a life in Ireland that did not include a migration experience.

While I met only a few enthusiasts who were native-Irish like Sam who still lived in Ireland, there were a number of others who immigrated to the U.S. and Canada between 1950 and 1980 following their completion of high school or college. I label these individuals first-generation Irish, as they were Irish-born but now lived in North America. Each of these enthusiasts was part of successive waves of migrants coming over to find work throughout the mid-twentieth century, due to a sluggish Irish economy (see Meagher 2005; Almeida 2006).

Each of these Irish-born North American citizens told me stories of their migration experience. Mary, who I described in previous chapters, immigrated to the Toronto area with her husband in the early 1970s following their graduation from college. “That was kind of the thing. A lot of people were doing that at the time [immigrating]” she explained, telling me that when they arrived they were quiet about their Irish ethnicity—“When we came at first we didn’t have the confidence. We wanted to find out about the country first. We certainly wouldn’t want to be going back to old roots at that time.” For instance, she continued, “we had a bit of music in our home, [my husband] and I, but we never brought it outside our home. You know, people would say: ‘Well you speak funny, and you’ve got thick accents.’ We were embarrassed,” Mary said. Even though they spoke Irish they wouldn’t have thought of using it at that time (Fieldnotes in pi page 4).

Mary’s Irish heritage was put under wraps, as during that period in her life, it was more important to be Canadian. “You see, we were young, we could be one of



them [smiles],” she explained, emphasizing that she and her husband wished to make their Irish identities less visible. “A lot of the Irish immigrants in this area [were] in the same boat,” she explained, “they [were] mostly in the same generation and harbor the same feelings. They feel disjointed” (Fieldnotes in pi page 4, 5).<sup>48</sup>

Teddy also left Ireland after college in early-1970s, settling in the Philadelphia-area, where he established a career and began raising his family. He was born in the Midlands, in the central part of Ireland, not the *Gaeltacht*, and he remembered his first exposure to the language as words and phrases his parents used around their mostly English-speaking house.

When he was five he was introduced to the Irish language at the same time he was learning formal English—at the junior-infant level. He explained that his parents were not native speakers, but were educated in Irish, since it was introduced into the schools following Irish Independence in the early 1920s. “My mother was born in the 1920s and my father was born in 1916, so Irish wasn’t that well-established in the National Schools” he said, but by the time he was in school it had become a mandatory subject (Fieldnotes in tdy page 2).

Teddy’s immigration to the U.S., and subsequent employment and family obligations, resulted in his disengaging with the language for a long while. Although he possessed vivid memories of growing up in Ireland and professed a love for it, he was forced to concentrate on his job and family.

Mary and Teddy were part of a generation of Irish-born who lived their lives straddling both Ireland and North America. The construction of their heritages,

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<sup>48</sup> I mentioned parts of this same conversation with Mary in chapter five when she talked about *Riverdance*.

therefore, was based on their recollection of an Irish childhood that included learning the Irish language, as well as a personal migration experience accompanied by a pull to assimilate upon arrival. Mostly, they recollected having to de-emphasize their Irish identities.

The second-generation Irish, or first-generation American-born, constituted a greater number of enthusiasts at the language events than those who came directly from Ireland. Each of those who shared their stories with me had Irish parents who emigrated from Ireland in the 1920s, at a time following the Irish Civil War. Additionally, these enthusiasts also grew up in Irish-immigrant neighborhoods in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, or Saint Louis, and so their personal narratives included references to Catholic school, parish-life, the hearing of multiple ethnic languages, and vivid tales of Ireland from their Irish-born parents.

Clara's mother and father moved to south Boston in the 1920s from County Clare, and she and her siblings were born and raised in "Southie" in the 1930s and 1940s; she remembered their neighborhood as "still very Irish, very, very Irish." Clara said that: "most of my friends [were] Irish American and I think, until I was about eighteen or nineteen, we were in very tight" (Fieldnotes in gui page 5).

Her parents migrated into an Irish America that was mostly urban and organized into parishes. She described:

...[M]y parents were born in Ireland, they were both from [the West] in Ireland...but because of that we were raised in Boston in a very Irish environment. Most of the adults I knew were Irish-born, so...the tradition was very strong...everything...the music. My father was a great reader so he was very up on the history of Ireland and the United States. And so I guess I got these stories, really...as they say...from the cradle. You know they were just part of my life. (Fieldnotes in gui page 95)

Clara cherished her memories of growing up in what she considered an Irish household. Her narrative was further enhanced by stories about Ireland told to her and her siblings by her mother and father. They, unlike Mary and Teddy above, who came over decades later, migrated to America under much different circumstances. “They came after the Civil War in Ireland [in the early 1920s]” and “they were on the losing side,” explained Clara, “they were Republicans and it was the Free Stat[ers] that won. So a lot of Irish that emigrated [from Ireland to America] at that time were of Republican heritage.”

Clara continued by explaining her parents’ exodus from Ireland—“My mother told me when British soldiers came to their home [they were] searching for her brother, who was subsequently chased and fired upon...escaping,” adding that “they lived in interesting times...; the uprising happened when they were kids and then after that the Civil War, so they saw a lot of this stuff first hand.” She also told me that her parents did not return to Ireland until sometime in the 1960s. By the time they returned, both of Clara’s grandparents had already died; “they had never seen, from the day they left, they had never seen their parents again” (Fieldnotes in gui page 5 and 8, 9).

Those like Clara who were second-generation Irish constructed their heritage from memories growing up in neighborhoods amongst Irish immigrants. They also heard stories of Ireland from their parents, and another common attribute was their recollection of hearing the Irish language. Eleanor—who I mentioned in chapter three—recognized that her mother spoke Irish, whereas Clara remembered her

mother speaking Irish phrases or English with an Irish sentence structure. She did not know this, however, until she began learning the language decades later.

Upon learning that the Irish language was a part of their lives growing up, these second-generation enthusiasts felt that their knowing Irish added an extra ingredient to narrative. Andy, who was also second-generation, had grown up in an immigrant neighborhood near the town of Worcester, Massachusetts, in the 1930s. He remembered his grandparents speaking Irish to him when he was a child. “My mother was born near Killarney and she came over in the early 1920s [and] my father’s parents were born in west Kerry,” he explained, but both his grandparents “were fluent speakers, [but] my mother only knew a few words in Irish.” Andy further said that his grandmother had taught him a few phrases, and that “she was kind of happy that I asked her about it. So, that was I guess my first exposure to the language and then I got very interested in [it]” (Fieldnotes in cc page 109, 110).

In addition to listening to stories as children, having knowledge of the Irish language and experiences from the ethnic neighborhoods, these ethnics, similar to the generations before them (first-generation Irish), experienced a period of time after moving out of the ethnic neighborhood when their Irish identity lay dormant.

Following her graduation from high school, Clara said she was out “...traveling and working and meeting other people,” and consequently she “wasn’t as active in things Irish.” She said: “[It was not until] after I married and when my kids were smaller, [that] all that came back to me because [of] the stories I would be telling them...the one’s I’d heard from my father and mother.”

Clara, like many others of her generation, reconnected with her ethnic past only after she placed it on hold for a few decades. It was the Irish language that brought her back and the language events where she found others who shared similar interests. Most were middle-aged, middle-class, whites who shared a desire to reconnect to their ancestral roots (Fieldnotes in gui page11).

Stepping up to the third generation, as many as a dozen who I interviewed had at least one grandparent of Irish ancestry. It was this generation of language enthusiasts who formed the cohort from which sociologists such as Alba (1990), Gans (1979) and Waters (1990) developed their concepts of symbolic and optional ethnicity (see chapters one, three and six wherein I describe these ideas). Also amongst these enthusiasts, I noticed an increase in the number of grandparents of mixed origins who were mostly part of the post-famine generation of immigrants that migrated to North America around the turn of the nineteenth century.

Denise, who I described in the previous chapter, was third-generation Irish on her mother's side. Her mother's mother emigrated from County Waterford, while her mother's father was born in Wisconsin of Irish parents. "[W]ith names like Nora and Maggie, you know...lots of Irish names," she explained, saying that her grandfather's three older brothers were born in Ireland. "So at least part of the family anyway was born [there] before they came over here, so that's a pretty direct connection," she reasoned (Fieldnotes in dgg page 6).

Without the aid of my digital recorder, I would not have been able to follow the convoluted and confusing network that comprised some of these ancestries. "Dad's family goes further back than that. I think they came over in like the

beginning of the 1800s or something like that, way before the Famine,” Denise further explained, describing how her father’s side was Scots Irish, the Scottish who came over and settled in West Virginia. Her Dad’s side of the family “didn’t necessarily talk about being of Celtic background,” but she still felt that “the things that they did, you know music on the back porch and lots and lots of storytelling and all of those kinds of things were very much rooted in that tradition” (Fieldnotes in dgg page 6).

Although both sets of Denise’s grandparents were from Ireland, her father’s side was Scots Irish (reference chapter three), whereas her mother’s side was Catholic, part of the Irish who came over in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Only one of her four grandparents was from Ireland, however, as the rest were American-born.

Nathan, the young man from Buffalo who I described in chapter five, was also third-generation Irish. He explained that on his mother’s side the family was of Irish ancestry, which included three out-of-four of his grandparents. His mother’s side was New York City Irish while his father was from western Pennsylvania, descended from Germans who went further back—four to five generations.

“So both my parents came from a pretty settled...they were very much [from an] assimilated American background,” Nathan reasoned, telling me that his parents and grandparents were assimilated because it was his great-grandparents who came over from Ireland on his mother’s side. He further elaborated:

I know that the family had come from the West of Ireland—Limerick, Kerry—I think these were the two main places where my mother’s side of the family had come from. So, I guess I would say that [while] growing up, it was always said...[that] my mother always

had a strong ethnic sense but, in terms of concrete expressions of Irish culture like...in terms of the like Gaelic language or music or dancing or those kinds of things, there really wasn't too much [of that] growing up. What was there was a strong sense of Catholicism, Irish Catholicism, or having a Catholic identity—a...brand of Catholic piety—religiosity, that was very much associated with the ethnic sense, that religion you know, Catholicism particularly, and [that] was kind of tied into Irishness. (Fieldnotes in nat page 19)

Nathan's third-generation heritage shared commonalities with many others of his generation because he was from two distinctly different ancestries. What was unusual was his identification with both his Irish and German side, as most others favored one over the other.

Daniel, a California language enthusiast who I mentioned in chapter five, constructed his Irish heritage, much like Nathan, in a uniquely different way. Although third-generation Irish, he was not aware of possessing an Irish ancestry until much later in his life. "[M]y mother didn't even tell my sisters and [me] that we had Irish heritage until we [my wife and I] already...moved to [California], so it was like in the mid-1980s or something," he explained, yet once he discovered he had Irish ancestry, he said:

I started thinking more about...the Irish background and I started getting interested in mostly...the music. And then just the geographical, you know maps and stuff, but [it was mostly] the music and the Saint Patrick's deal and then the history. I bought...three little books, the *Green Flag*, and I started just reading about Irish history and the Celts and stuff like that. You know it's funny how when you find out about something like that [your ancestry] and you start: "Well, I wonder about this now?" (Fieldnotes in gui pages 1, 4, 18-19)

Unlike most of the others I met, Daniel set out constructing an Irish identity upon discovering that he had a fragment of Irish ancestry. Immediately, he began gathering information about his Irish ancestry, as if making up for lost time. When I

asked him why he was interested in learning the language and everything else about Ireland at this time in his life, he told me that his family was dysfunctional in a way because they were not interested in their ethnic background. But for himself, he reasoned that he did not have a foundation—"I think there was definitely a missing thing there in not having heard the stories about [our] childhood and our parent's life," he said, so "when this opening came up, it was just: 'Hey. Hey I actually have some idea where this whole family came from, where part of it came from anyway, and it was kind of exciting to have that'" (Fieldnotes in gui page 4).

From my dialogue with those of third-generation Irish, they made no mention of hearing the Irish language spoken by their family members while growing up. Many in this group were descendants of the Irish immigrants who came over in the last few decades of the nineteenth or the early part of the twentieth century. It stands to reason that although these migrants may have been Irish speakers, they would have dropped the language within the first few decades of living here in North America.

For those like me who are fourth-generation Irish and beyond, our heritage is constructed from a number of sources, but mostly compiled from those stories told to us by relatives or written down in textual form. My family descended from the Famine Irish, and, since I am fifth-generation Irish, my ancestry includes a number of ethnicities other than my Irish one. Further, I have no direct experience of living in an Irish-immigrant neighborhood, nor do I possess any stories told to me from my Irish relatives. I do not have an account of my great-great-grandparents' journey



from County Cork, if indeed that is where they came from, nor do I know anything about my maternal grandparents.

These stories showed the variety of ways enthusiasts construct their heritages. I next describe how this building of a personal narrative is a means for bridging the gap between the past and the present, between those of the diaspora and the Irish people, and between the places of North America and Ireland.

### **Heritage and Diaspora—Bridging the Gap**

Enthusiasts told me about their pasts, sharing, for example, narratives that included struggles with immigration and assimilation, feelings of sorrow and loss, romanticized Irish-immigrant neighborhood life, and early exposure to the Irish language. Whether first-generation immigrants who produced their heritages from recollections of a childhood in Ireland followed by their migration to North America and subsequent discomfort when trying to assimilate, or fifth-generation Irish like me, who possessed multiple ethnicities and relied mostly on history texts and stories from relatives to reconstruct an Irish past, the process of creating a personal heritage was for everyone a means for linking the past to the present in grounding their ethnic identities.

Nathan, the young man from Buffalo, was never influenced by his parents to identify with or connect to his Irish or German ancestry. Why he wished to do so beginning in the 1980s confounded him. “And I was thinking about this more recently,” he said, “it could be for me it’s a sense of trying to retrieve my past. Or, retrieve the past of my parents which I feel in a sense, a very large sense, alienated from...” (Fieldnotes in gui page 31). Nathan was compelled to reestablish a link to

his Irish past, a part of his history which was essentially left out of his life because of his parents' lack of interest.

Nathan had traveled widely in Europe where he recognized the different ways heritage was perceived between Americans and Europeans. He reasoned that for most Europeans their "collective memory goes back thousands of years from town to town" he said, and because of this, their "collective history" is much deeper, unlike Americans whose heritage is based "...in some other place [Ireland, for example]."

While there, Nathan said that the people he met were more rooted because they could say that their "great-great-great-great-grandparents, they were also here, or the next town over," whereas in America "you can't do that... [because] you're severed, and so you try to make up for that and it's hard to try...to look back to your roots. You know where the roots of your ancestors came from [so] you can do it [but only] to an extent," he explained (Fieldnotes in gui page 14).

The desire to rebuild this "severed" link was for many a way to temper or replace a deep sense of loss. Whether experienced firsthand through an individual's migration experience, or, in the case of Dan, who I met at the Milwaukee Irish Festival, felt through stories he remembered from his childhood. Loss was a prevalent emotion instigating this process of reconnection as Dan recalled the life of his grandparents:

The place they came from was beautiful, but the life was very hard. And for them, [Illinois] was amazing and wonderful. They had a big farmhouse. There wasn't running water but a pump outside. There wasn't electricity back then, but they didn't have electricity back in Ireland, so for them to be here was like a huge step up. I don't want to romanticize the roots or heritage. I don't know if it was: "Man, I'm

glad to be out of here,” because they left family behind. I mean think about that. I mean [it] still is a hurtful thing. They left feeling they’re never going to go back. Feeling they would never see those that they had left behind, and they never did see them. (Fieldnotes in gui page 96)

Others claimed to have experienced this disconnect in a more spiritual sense, for example Laura, a fourth-generation Irish language enthusiast, told me that upon leaving Ireland after her first visit there, she claimed to have felt such an emotional feeling of loss that it brought her to tears. “I felt like I...you know it was not that I wanted to leave. And...it was for some reason bad to leave. It was more like that. But I was just sitting there and I was just overcome with grief on the ferry ride back to Scotland” she said, as tears welled up in her eyes. She told me she was feeling for all those who were forced to leave their families behind (Fieldnotes in places page 57).

The language was a tool used by enthusiasts to reconnect to an Irish past, a means to address the emotions of sorrow and loss. Timothy, a native Irish speaker, who I first mentioned in chapter four, felt that Irish Americans were learning the Irish language because of their feelings of disconnection and instability brought on by the assimilation process. He reasoned that “...all second-, third-, [and] fourth-generation immigrants struggle with their ethnicity, struggle with their heritage. Once you leave the home place there’s always an attempt to [bridge] that gap” therefore “in the act of learning the language, there’s an effort in retrieving the memories, the stories, and the tradition” (Fieldnotes in trad page 1).

Teddy, who grew up in Ireland only to have spent all of his adult life in the U.S., felt that his relearning of the language was way for him to rebuild a lost past. “I

just...found it a very interesting process to reconnect with this dormant language that I had,” explained Teddy, referring to his being asked to teach Irish after a twenty-year absence, “and I was amazed at what simple things I’d forgotten and I was amazed at what I remembered.” Teddy found that the language provided for him an instant recollection of past experiences:

My memory is digging back...digging back and activating all that...you know I had studied quite intensely in the language. I had the five years in secondary school with good teachers in secondary school, and one [teacher] in the last year in secondary school who was from Kerry, [and] ...she loved to read aloud. And she read with such beautiful Irish and I remember just laughing in her class. And she just conveyed such a love of the literature. It was just delightful. (Fieldnotes in gui page 8)

Some of Teddy’s memories of his childhood were revived through his renewed use of the language, which in turn helped him to fill in parts of his past that may have otherwise lay dormant.

Regarding identity and connection to place through ancestral ties, Stuart Hall (1990, 1992, 2000) argues that identities are constructed from a mix of many histories and should not be thought of in pure and essentialist ways. Rather, and as I have shown in this chapter, enthusiasts construct their ethnic identities based on a number of personal histories that they select in order for them to maintain a link to a people and a place. Language is the common denominator in bringing together these people of all generations who have multiple narratives and experiences.

The process by which language enthusiasts bridge a gap, link, reconnect, or invent an Irish heritage, in part demonstrates the flexible and dynamic nature of identity construction. Returning to Hall’s idea of diaspora and the role of history (I use part of the quote here that I used in the introduction) in constructing identity, he

describes how “[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories” yet they “...undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power,” and, in this sense, identities are “[f]ar from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (1990, 225; see also Nash 2002).

In my dialogue with enthusiasts, as well as in my review of scholarly works, it became clear that heritage is a process, one that is possessed of variability, subjectivity, inventedness, embellishment, romanticizing, and myth. Language enthusiasts produce heritage through family narratives of the past, narratives that often have no historical record or archive, for the purpose of replacing something that they felt was lost. I understand that the construction of my heritage remains a work-in-progress, a collage that I put together from a number of sources from different times. Despite the dynamic nature of this process, however, my heritage gives me comfort and stability in knowing that I indeed possess an Irish past that is linked to a specific people and place.

In addition to a link through heritage, enthusiasts similarly build a connection to place. Since nearly all who comprised my study are not Irish citizens who live their daily lives in Ireland—in other words they are not real-Irish (see chapter six)—their tie to place is created from “imagined geographies.” In the next chapter, I explore

how those enthusiasts who are part of the Irish diaspora use the Irish language as a means for engineering a connection to their perceived ancestral home.

## Chapter Eight: Irish Places Imagined Geographies of the Irish Diaspora

At the breakfast table one morning at a language event on the East Coast, I sat down with a group of people who were sharing stories about seeing the places where their relatives lived, or once lived, in Ireland. Adam, one of the storytellers, told of how, a few years before, he and his father visited the small town where his grandparents had resided: “We stood on my grandmother’s porch...what had been her porch anyway,” he said, where they

...live[d] in [a] little town on the Loch Corrib [in Galway] and there’s a little spit of ground—Flaherty or Fogerty stronghold—and ruins are sticking out of [it] ...God awful picturesque you know. And we’re standing there, because I smoked at the time [laughs] so you know, I’m outside smoking, and I...said to my dad, you know, pretty naive, I still am; I’m sixty years old and I’m still pretty damn silly, and I said to my dad: “Why the hell would anybody leave here? I mean, My God!” And he looked at me and he said: “Because they were starving to death!”...and I said: “Oh, okay.” A bit of an issue then: “Yeah okay I get it.” (Fieldnotes in places page 12)

In an earlier conversation with Adam, he told me that his father was born in an Irish neighborhood in New York City amongst Germans, Czechs, and Italians, and worked as a civil servant, a tradition passed down from his grandfather, an Irish immigrant who came to the States and became a policeman. Adam considered himself Irish, as powerful memories of Saint Patrick’s Day, corned beef and cabbage, no meat on Fridays, and his grandparents’ stories of Ireland combined to make him so. Ireland, the place his folks called “home” even though neither of them had been born or raised there, had become a home for him also. It was his grandparents who

came over to America, to escape from the destitution that was Ireland at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to look for a better place to live. “I never went to Ireland until the mid-seventies” Adam continued, “and I was...I don’t know how old I was...I was thirty years old...so I don’t know what there [Ireland] was..., I’d not a clue. But I was raised with this weird love of it, not knowing what it was...” (Fieldnotes in places page 12).

Adam’s love of Ireland began from hearing family stories passed down through the generations which over time were elevated to mythic levels, and so he said he always felt obligated to go there, to see if Ireland was all that his family made it out to be. He made his first journey without his parents or grandparents, the former not actually going until much later, and the latter never to return to the land from which they were forced to emigrate due to famine.

“Well I’m sure there were people who jumped up and said: ‘Aw, cool! I’m go[ing] there [America] and...make a lot of money and have a ball,’” Adam continued telling all of us sitting with him at the table, “but...that wasn’t why my family came here, [and] I don’t think that’s why a lot of people [did], and so when they came here because they didn’t necessarily want to...it’s like they didn’t perceive that they had much of an option” (Fieldnotes in places page 13).

Adam’s story prompted an outpouring of similar tales from the others sitting there, many sharing the narratives of their immigrant relatives and the difficulties encountered once they arrived in North America. After a while, he finished up the conversation by saying: “They left their heart back there and so the folks that came



after them were raised with some roughly distorted sense of what the hell where back there was...” (Fieldnotes in places page 13).

Adam’s description of his experience visiting his ancestral home of Ireland illustrates how individuals construct an attachment to place through the process of “imagined geographies” (see Said 1978). As this chapter will show, language enthusiasts produce images of Ireland from family narratives—stories that are passed down to them through the generations—and their reading of texts: literature, poetry, music lyrics, film, and maps (see chapter eight). These images and myths of their ancestral home are reinforced, for many, by travel to Ireland, where they encounter the Irish landscape firsthand. Their interaction with the landscape sometimes generates a profound sense of loss and nostalgia, a reminder of their ancestor’s migration experience, even for those like Adam, who are generations removed from these historical episodes.

Besides considering Ireland their home place, enthusiasts also construct an image of the West of Ireland as a symbol of an authentic and traditional Irish culture based on their perception that these spaces, in particular the *Gaeltachtaí*, are regions containing a majority of Irish speakers. This prompts a number of enthusiasts to travel there with the hope of having an authentic experience; many enroll in Irish language class and indeed converse with native-Irish speakers. In rare instances, some return dissatisfied, as their vision of the *Gaeltacht* was not what they expected.

Many return home from their visits, however, with stories that blend the scenic landscape of the West with their listening to and conversing in the Irish language, which further enhances their imagined geography of Ireland and the their

perception that a pure and native culture still exists there. In turn, these interludes create for them, and also for those who hear their stories, a mythological and romanticized vision of Ireland and in particular the *Gaeltacht*.

Stories, such as the one told by Adam, become an integral component for linking the individual to home place—in particular the West of Ireland, as it represents the last bastion of language and traditional Irish, or Gaelic, culture in general. His story further shows how Ireland is viewed differently depending on the generation. For those first-generation Irish like Adam's grandfather, the land came to symbolize his homeland and a landscape of tragedy and loss. His father, the second-generation, imagined Ireland as a place of despair. He was more concerned with assimilating into the American mainstream rather than returning to his roots. Finally, those third-generation Irish like Adam had an image of the place as one of beauty, a place that he could call his ancestral home from the comfort of his actual home in America.

In this chapter, I begin by outlining the contemporary work of geographers and others who explore the concept of imagined geographies. Instead of a linear two-way and static concept of diaspora based on a return to the ancestral home, these scholars explore a dynamic version where diaspora is a process involving the collection of many cultural attributes and consisting of multiple home places. I engage with this contemporary literature in order to demonstrate how those who choose to exercise a symbolic or optional Irish identity—language enthusiasts—maintain a powerful link to Ireland despite their being far-removed both generationally and geographically from this place.

Next, I show how language enthusiasts produce or are influenced by images that help them construct an imagined geography of Ireland. A connection is made from textual images such as written family narratives, history texts, literature and novels, poetry, and film, as well as performances such as storytelling, Catholic mass, traditional music sessions (*seisiún*), dance (*céilí*), and popular music. The language also acts to enhance an individual's connection to place, and often, as Adam's narrative suggests, those who visit Ireland for the purpose of engaging with or learning the Irish language in its "natural" environment return with enhanced versions of the place. Specifically, I look at how the West of the country is perceived of as the last frontier of traditional Irish culture of which the language is thought to be the primary component.

Finally, I investigate how the imagined geography of Ireland, specifically the *Gaeltacht*, is seen by enthusiasts as a reservoir of traditional and authentic Irish culture. Adopting ideas from Hall's (2000) contemporary concept of diaspora, I argue that enthusiasts construct their contemporary Irish identities based on an imagined "native" Irish culture that calls into question essentialist ideas of pure identities and fixed conceptions of Irish place. I show how some enthusiasts come to see the *Gaeltacht* in a different way: a dynamic space that is constructed through transient activities such as the language-immersion event rather than a static place occupying regions in the West of Ireland.

### **Home Places and Imagined Geographies**

Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) describes the concept of "homeland" in his groundbreaking text *Space and place: a perspective of experience* as a

more or less fixed and static perception of place to which individuals and groups assign deeply felt emotions. “This profound attachment to homeland appears to be a worldwide phenomenon. It is not limited to any particular culture and economy,” Tuan writes, where “[t]he city or land is viewed as mother, and it nourishes; place is an archive of fond memories and splendid achievements that inspire the present; place is permanent and hence reassuring to man, who sees frailty in himself and chance and flux everywhere” (154).

A connection to an ancestral homeland is generated, according to Tuan, by an innate desire to belong to a place. Often this link is constructed through the process of “imagined geographies”—a term, as I mentioned in the introduction, coined by literary theorist Edward Said (1978) as part of his theory of “Orientalism.” Geographer Gillian Rose (2000) summarizes Said’s concept in this way:

...[O]ver a long historical period, many Western European and North American visitors have painted the landscapes of what they called the *Orient*, photographed its people, translated its languages, interpreted its cultural practices, and written about the area in academic texts, novels, poems and travelogues. This accumulated body of knowledge about the place gradually developed a series of assumptions about how to approach ‘the East’, and it is this vast number of texts about the Orient, with their shared assumptions about the area, that Said calls *Orientalism*. But he argues that all the attention was very far from being an objective study of distant lands. Instead, it propagated a series of myths about the place and its peoples which then influenced how westerners experienced the Orient when they visited. (92, 93, her emphasis)

Not only does Said’s work explore the notion of imagined geographies, it also furthered the idea that these images are created and used by those in power to construct place based on their economic, political, social, or cultural interests. While individuals indeed develop powerful “senses of place” and attachment to homeland

(and while this was an important facet of humanist geography that began in the 1970s (see Buttimer and Seamon 1980; Relph 1976)), the idea that these places were actually social constructions became the emphasis of a number of geographers beginning in the 1980s, with the introduction of cultural and social theory into the discipline (Cosgrove 2000; see also Adams et al. 2001).

Specific to the Irish landscape, Catherine Nash (1993a) argues that writings from early twentieth-century Nationalistic literary figures helped to create a unique form of Irish identity that was rooted in the West of Ireland's rough and scenic landscape. "The bleak but splendid West demanded strength and a determination to survive, and invited sensitivity to the sublime too. Because of what nationalist writers saw as a closeness to the people of the West to this wild landscape, westerners came to embody all the virtues of Irishness," writes Gillian Rose (2000, 91), explaining how Nash's work revealed an imagined geography of Irish identity.

In a separate study, Nash (1993b) argues that the western Irish landscape produces a wide array of meanings, and through the lens of feminist theory and post colonialism, she interprets nineteenth-century artwork and how it depicted Irish women. She concluded that

[i]n the construction of the image of the West of Ireland in the first decades of the twentieth century, many of these intersections of gender, landscape and nation are manifest. The image of the West stands at the centre of a web of discourses of racial and cultural identity, femininity, sexuality and landscape which were being used in attempts to secure cultural identity and political freedom. (44)

She further surmises, referring to the image of the "isolated rural cottage," that it

...represented the realization, both in the physical fabric of the landscape and in the moral and spiritual domain, of the ideal form of Irish society. Its depiction in Irish landscape painting participated in

the construction of Irish identity and the gender identities upon which it relied. Representation of landscape in early twentieth-century Ireland was coded with meaning in terms of both national and gender identity. (49)

In essence, an imagined geography of the West of Ireland was developed in the early years of the twentieth century, through literature and paintings, which was used to promote, according to Nash, a specific agenda for uniting the nation against the dominance of the English by portraying the Irish as tough and hardy as well as virtuous and moral.

Imagined geographies of place are often developed by individuals and groups without them ever going to these places. However, as Said further elaborates in his work, when they do visit these places they bring with them these predetermined notions of the place, which, in turn, influences the way they feel about the landscape and the people (2000; see Rose 2000).

The reification of imagined geographies through visits to place is evident in DeLyser's (1999) study of tourists and workers who visit and work at the ghost town of Bodie, California. Her study shows how landscape conveys a number of meanings for visitors based on already held images they had of the western U.S. "... [T]he mythic West is a shifting construct: sometimes located in space, at other times only in the mind; and each generation has made its own contributions to the myth," writes DeLyser (610), telling us that individuals and groups attach meaning to landscapes in different ways and at different times. Influenced by texts such as film, television, and literature, tourists derive meaning from landscapes that is based on these influences. Yet, the meaning of these landscapes changes, too, depending on the prevailing

social, political, economic, and even generational conditions during a particular time period.

As I will demonstrate in the following sections, language enthusiasts indeed developed imagined geographies of Ireland based on a variety of sources. Additionally, most of those who I interviewed had visited Ireland at least in part to substantiate or reinforce these predetermined images of place. However I further wished to know why they established this often very powerful link to their perceived ancestral home. Some scholars argue that this process of attachment and belonging is a response to other, much larger processes that are working outside of an individual's everyday cognitive world.

Regarding the mythic West, DeLyser (1999) reasons that individuals construct their imagined geographies “[i]n response to increasing urbanism and industrialization.” She further explains that “Americans looked upon the mythic West as a majestic and uncluttered landscape, sparsely populated by Anglo settlers, and, for many, it became an antidote to the crass commercialism of twentieth-century life” (610). In similar ways, it could be argued that language enthusiasts look to the Irish-language landscape of the *Gaeltacht* as a means for grounding their own Irish identities based on their perception that this place is a reservoir of traditional and authentic Irish culture.

Paul Basu (2005), in his study of those who considered themselves as part of the Highlander diaspora in North America, finds that these individuals wish to be connected with their perceived ancestral home place because of “a crisis in belonging

that has been characterized as a post-colonial unsettling of settler societies” (124). He writes that

...the appeal of indigenoussness is an appeal to a sense of unproblematic territorial belonging that has become impossible in their diasporic home countries. Through an intertwining of stories told and stories heard, of stories dreamed, imagined, and desired, these, the “morally dispossessed” of the post-colony, are able to participate in a collective “Celtic dreaming” of their own and, (symbolically) repossessing their Highland homelands, transform the hesitant hope of “We *could* belong here” to the confident assertion of “We *do* belong here”. (124)

The “Celtic dreaming” of these diasporic Scottish peoples is similar to the phenomenon of language enthusiasts who construct a powerful link to Ireland as their ancestral home despite having lived their lives outside of Ireland.

Another key feature of the link between imagined geographies and diaspora is the idea of multiple home places. As I mentioned in the introduction, Stuart Hall (1990, 1992, 2000) reasons that those in the diaspora can possess powerful connections to multiple homes despite their being far removed both generationally and geographically from these places. Combining a dynamic perspective of place with that of identity and ethnicity, Hall (2000) prompts us to think more about the multiple ways that culture, place, and identity are linked, therefore promoting a more thorough investigation or redefining of diaspora.

Hall, and Paul Gilroy (1993), use as an example the African Caribbean diaspora and the invention of a unique form of music and religion created through the blending of a number of cultures over time. Their idea of a diasporic identity includes “many imagined ‘homes’ (and therefore no one, single, original homeland); it has many different ways of ‘being at home’—since it conceives of individuals as



capable of drawing on different maps of meaning, and of locating themselves in different imaginary geographies at one and the same time—but it is not tied to one, particular place” (Hall 2000, 207).

Hall (2000) further describes diasporic people as those who “...belong to more than one world, speak more than one language (literally and metaphorically), inhabit more than one identity, have more than one home; who have learned to negotiate and translate between culture, and who, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, have learned to live with, and indeed speak from, *difference*” (206, his emphasis).

In this context, geographers such as Doreen Massey (1994) encourage us to look at place itself as “open and hybrid—a product of interconnecting flows—of routes rather than roots;” in other words, she wants us to view places from the outside rather than from the inside, by questioning “...the whole history of place as a center of meaning connected to a rooted and ‘authentic’ sense of identity forever challenged by mobility” (quoted in Cresswell 2004, 53; see also Massey and Jess 2000).

Tim Cresswell (2004) also feels that “[t]hinking of place as performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialized ways where place is constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways” (9). Instead of identities or ethnicities being tied to fixed and bounded places—native, pure, and origin are typical words used to describe this phenomenon—place “becomes an event rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the inauthentic” where identities will be “marked by openness and change” (9).

Although Hall, Massey and Cresswell each promote a rethinking of identity and place that is fluid and dynamic, I wish to show that this discourse is not entirely supported through the words and actions of language enthusiasts, but rather that a sort of ambiguous or blurred version of identity and place-attachment occurs. On the one hand, most enthusiasts perceived of Ireland as their ancestral home place which came to symbolize for them a container of pure, native, traditional, and authentic Irish culture that was locked into a physical location—generally the West of Ireland and in particular the *Gaeltacht*. On the other hand, enthusiasts constructed an identity that was hybrid, voluntary, and optional which they supported and legitimized through an imagined geography of place that consisted of multiple home places. The following sections set the stage for this apparent contradiction, as I expose, through the words of language enthusiasts, that a combination of both fixed and dynamic versions of identity and place coexist.

### **Visions of Home, Landscape, and Language**

Borrowing Hall's idea of diaspora and applying it to the words and actions of language enthusiasts, I next demonstrate how enthusiasts create an imagined geography of Ireland which, although not their physical home place, is an important component of ethnic identity. Oftentimes their imagined geography of Ireland is further enhanced through their personal experiences when visiting the place, which, more often than not, amplifies their preconceived notions of place, in turn producing an even more powerful connection.

Finn, the East Coast language enthusiast I with whom I spoke to begin this dissertation, had always considered himself Irish despite his being third-generation.

He remembered as a child having an idea of what Ireland was from textbooks in class. “I can remember being a kid, geography class, fourth or fifth grade, and [I] cheated, I looked ahead: ‘Let me find Ireland in here,’” he told me, saying that: “ I remember looking, saying: ‘Oh my God they made it sound like the most horrible place on earth!’—total poverty and what not, and all the other countries they had in there were just—this and this history—and all the stuff they’d done through the years, and the Irish part was...not at all what I would have expected because of the mentality of my people towards Ireland and the Irish,” referring here to the family narratives told while growing up at home in Baltimore (Fieldnotes in fnn page 18).

Finn visited Ireland with his fiancé in the early 1980s. “I went to Ireland, and neither of us had been there before; we weren’t married yet [and it was] quaint, but the second you get there you feel like you’re home. It is that comfortable. It’s not like a foreign country,” he said, telling me that they were playing with the radio dial while driving in the car and their discovery of *Raidió na Gaeltachta* “Irish-language radio”. “She thought it was German and I’m like...I think that’s Irish,” Finn continued, “[we] ended up out in the West in Connemara—the *Gaeltacht*—and I remember walking into a shop and the shopkeeper just saying...probably it was just: ‘*Dia Duit. Cén Choí a bhfuil tú?*’ “Hello. How are you?” or something like that, and I was embarrassed thinking, even living in America, you know a little bit of Italian or Spanish, or *Ciao*, or whatever...and other than *Erin go Braib* “Ireland forever” I mean, how could you think that you’re Irish and not know any Irish? I remember that struck me” (Fieldnotes in fnn page 17).

My dialogue with Finn shows how language enthusiasts construct images of Ireland based on their exposure to a number of texts in combination with their personal experiences of place. Initially formed through family narratives, Finn's, much like Adam's (in the beginning of this chapter), romantic vision of Ireland developed prior to his visit there decades later. He was protective of the place at a young age, as he dispelled the notion of Ireland as a poor, impoverished country. Later in life, in his twenties or thirties, he made his first visit there that subsequently enhanced his preconceived idea of Ireland as "home."

These imagined geographies of home originate through a variety of representations, both textual and otherwise, that are formed well before enthusiasts visit Ireland, if indeed they do travel there. Both Adam and Finn were taught from a young age that Ireland was their home as each recalled being raised in an Irish household, surrounded by family members who professed and continually reinforced the idea that Ireland was indeed the place of their ancestors.

Enthusiast's recollection of growing up knowing that Ireland was their home was something they reasoned was part of their identities: an ingrained trait passed down from their parents or grandparents. While walking around New York City in the summer of 2006 with my friend Beth, whose parents came directly from Ireland in the early part of the 20th century, she spoke of all the "aliens" in New York, particularly the recent influx of South Asians and how she noticed they always mentioned "home" as being their home country, not the U.S. She remembered her parents being the same way. So when her mother would talk to her friends, she would always say: "Beth is going home" (Fieldnotes in places page 2).

Still others, such as Teddy, who grew up in Ireland but lived most of his adult life in the U.S., had visions of home that were grounded in his personal experiences from growing up there. Teddy told me he still felt

...quite connected [to Ireland]. Still, I really feel [sighs]...it's a hard thing to say, I never...I feel that whole notion of home has been challenged for me. ...I do feel very at home when I'm in Ireland. I'm not quite sure I can say that where I am here [in the States]. And yet, would I feel at home if I was living in Ireland? I don't know. It's hard to say that. I feel very connected with the land and the mood of the land [even though] ...the landscape itself is changing dramatically of course. (Fieldnotes in places page 26)

Teddy was born and raised in Ireland, having lived there up until his graduation from college in the 1970s. Now his home was near Philadelphia, where he had married and had children and worked a successful career as an accountant. Still, memories of Ireland persisted, and reintroducing himself to the Irish language after nearly thirty years provided a way for him to reconnect to his home. "I'm connecting with my history," he told me, "[t]he words have associations, the lore of the poetry that we [the Irish] have. I'm connecting with all of that. So anytime I'm speaking the language, I have associations, positive or negative" (Fieldnotes in gui page 9; also see chapter seven).

Unlike Teddy, who relied on his direct experience of growing up in Ireland to construct his image of home, a majority of language enthusiasts had no direct experience of living there. Instead, they relied on a one-time vacation, a yearly trip to see relatives, or in most cases, images of their ancestral home constructed from a number of other sources such as grade-school textbooks and family narratives.

During my conversation with Dan at the Milwaukee Irish Fest, he told me about his strong connection to Ireland despite his never visiting:

**Dan:** Oh, of course I love the literature; there's no question about that. I like that. And it's also...frustrat[ing] because you don't...you can't tap into that. There's nobody that just does it [translates literature]. But of course, I haven't gone to Ireland either, so I need to do that [laughs]. I need to go there [Ireland], [but] there's only so much money [laughs].

**Tom:** So do you have sort of a connection there [Ireland]? You haven't been there...Ireland?

**Dan:** Yeah, physically it's not there [meaning he has not actually visited Ireland]. Isn't that interesting?

**Tom:** But mentally?

**Dan:** Yeah. Yeah. Spiritually and imaginatively and all that...I'm as Irish as you can be. But you know...I identify as Irish...there's no question about that!"

**Tom:** That's always the fascinating part for me is that a lot of people have never even been there and they're five-generations removed and they have this...

**Dan:** Yeah! It's recognition. You know. I know that if I went there and was walking around...I mean [it] would...be just like going home. (Fieldnotes in mm pages 19–22)

Dan formed an image of Ireland as his home through his reading of poetry and language that was supplemented by his perceived Irish ancestry and his playing of traditional music. His telling me that "I haven't gone to Ireland" but "I know if I went there...it would be just like going home," meant that he had established a connection to and familiarity with Ireland, despite his never being there. While Teddy was born and raised in Ireland, yet conflicted as to how he felt about it as his home, Dan was confident that he was familiar enough with Ireland for it to feel like home if he did go there.

A majority of the language enthusiasts I spoke with had visited Ireland.

Some, like Sarah, whom I met in Milwaukee, decided to go there only after she began learning the language here in the States:

I saw Ireland. I mean I'd been learning Irish from [my teacher in the U.S.] and learning the language, but never really using it. And then I came to Ireland and I saw where everything was and it just grabbed me.... And I was just like a kid. I mean I...was just wide-eyed. I mean the whole way over. And the closer I got [to Donegal]...I mean I just kept looking at everything and thinking: "Wow!" And we came into *Gleann Cholm Cille* [small village on the Donegal coast] on the bus and I had the...most...it sounds really stupid, but I felt like I'd been there before. I mean I just had this..."Oh my God!" I mean it [felt] like a...conversion. I just really felt like I was home. (Fieldnotes in places page 13, 14)

Sarah's perception of Ireland was enhanced when she interacted with the landscape, and even though her Irish ancestors came from a different place than where she visited in Donegal, she insisted this place was her real home. On subsequent visits, she did go further south and find the actual home site of her relatives, which she admitted, did not provide as strong a connection as her experience in Donegal. It was her imagined geography of Ireland that provided for her the strongest link.

Adam too visited the actual site of his ancestors, which, unlike Sarah, he had maintained as his symbolic Irish home place. Having been saturated with narratives of this specific site throughout his childhood, he had developed a powerful link that was constructed over a long period of time. Adam's story revealed a number of interesting aspects concerning imagined geographies of home place and how these places are made meaningful.

He came to see it as a mythical place that fulfilled his expectations, whereas his grandfather, who experienced the place firsthand—both growing up there, and having to leave it when migrating to the U.S.—never to return—had a much different perspective. His father, who was sandwiched between these two generations, never went to this place until his son took him much later in life, and he reminded Adam that this landscape was not to be glorified. As the dialogue with his son suggests, Adam's father was more in touch with his father's migration experience—knowing his parent's home place was a symbol of destitution and sadness. In essence, places come to represent different things to different people, and in the case of language enthusiasts, at different times (DeLyser 1999).

Historian Richard White (1998), while writing of his and his Irish-born mother's attachment to her ancestral home, similarly explains how the symbolic meaning of home place is indeed interpreted differently depending on the generation and how individuals experience these places:

The power of that house, visible to me only after it burned, has been always visible to Sara Walsh [his mother]. It marked the distance she had traveled in the world, and it was the cause of her travels. Acquiring that farm and keeping it were the great collective work of my mother's family. That land was their home in a way I can never fathom; that land was a monster in a way I can understand all too well, for behind everything that happened—my grandmother's suffering, my grandfathers departure for Chicago, my mother's coming to America—was the power of that land. It drove the family it was meant to support. My mother's entire life has been lived in the shadow of that house and farm she left so long ago. It had to burn for me to comprehend that. (13, 14)

Enthusiasts not only construct an image of Ireland as their home place, but in many instances, the West of Ireland holds special significance. Whether having lived there or visited, or never having set foot there at all, nearly each enthusiast I



spoke with equated this region as a symbol of the Irish language, and the landscape itself was a symbol of traditional Irish culture in general.

Historian Kerby Miller (1985) writes of the nineteenth-century West of Ireland where

...in these regions traditional music, crossroads dancing, old wake customs and religious festivals, storytelling, and even remnants of formal *aisling* poetry still flourished or survived, while the church's authority remained relatively limited. "You would hear no word of English in Dingle at that time," recalled Tomás Ó Crohan of his west Kerry boyhood, "but Irish only spoken through all the streets and houses. The country was full to the lid of songs and stories, and you would not put a stir out of you from getting up in the morning to lying down at night but you would meet a poet, a man or woman, making songs on all the would be happening." The prevalence of the Irish language, high illiteracy rates, and poor transportation and communications both reflected and reinforced western peasants' relative insulation from American attractions....(470, 471, his emphasis)

Images of the West from popular history books, such as Miller's (1985) *Emigrants and Exiles*, gives readers the impression that the West of Ireland, as recently as the late 1800s, was a rather primitive and isolated Irish-speaking place. These historical accounts are further augmented by hearing personal narratives from those who have lived through these experiences.

At a language event on the East Coast, I spoke with an older gentleman, Cormac, who was a native-Irish speaker from the West of Ireland. He now lived in the Washington D.C. area, but had spent most of his childhood in Ireland. At that time, in the 1920s and 1930s, he said

[i]t was a common thing every Sunday night for the local farmers...sons and daughters...these would be the normal people to oversee the whole thing...someone might be asked to sing a song [or something, but] the dancing in the houses was killed in the 1930s by a decree from the government. Evidently they were not happy with the

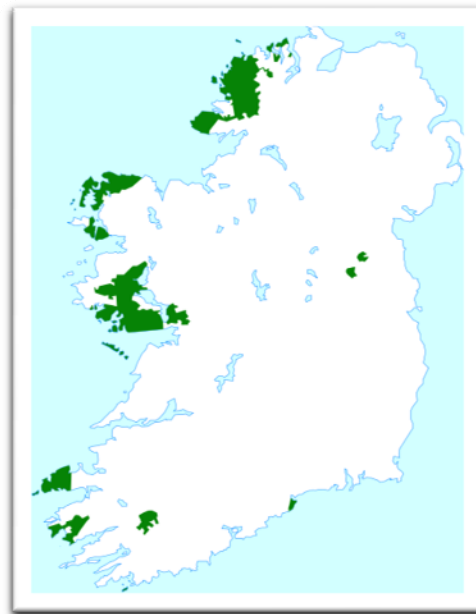
conduct of these dances and...so that gave rise to the different dancehalls.... But it was a pity that they...in the countryside [where] they danced in the individual houses...it [was] a pity... [that this was abolished]. (Fieldnotes in po page 630)

Cormac's story helped for me to construct an imagined geography of the West of Ireland as a rural and wholesome family place, a haven for Irish speakers and Gaelic cultural events such as traditional dance and music.

In addition to history texts and stories from those who grew up there, maps, in particular those that emphasize the existence of the *Gaeltachtaí*, are important tools for enhancing an individual's imagined geography of the West of Ireland. Often the *Gaeltacht* are depicted on websites and tourist maps that give the impression to the reader that these bounded areas contain the last remaining Irish speakers (Figure 11).

This perception does have merit.

Historical geographer Nuala Johnson's (1993, 1997) study of the *Gaeltacht Commission Report (GCR)* published in 1926, showed how the mapping of the Irish *Gaeltacht* was detrimental because "[w]hile mapping has long preoccupied the state in its articulation of cultural policy" in essence "the map has frequently acted as an archive to monitor decline and failure. The map then acts as a metaphor for a failed cultural project, a spatially defined society imploding under the strains of modernity" (1997,



**Figure 10** Map of the *Gaeltacht* areas in Ireland (2006) (source: Wikimedia commons <http://www.gaelsaoire.ie/default.asp>, accessed 11 November 2009).

188). Indeed the *Gaeltacht* was thought of by many enthusiasts as the last refuge of the language and therefore they most visited these places in order to experience encounters with “real” Irish speakers residing in their natural environment. During a visit with Caitlin, who organized Irish classes in the Midwest, she recalled for me her first visit to the *Gaeltachtaí*:

One summer I said: “Alright, the hell with it,” and I went to *Oideas Gael* [Irish language summer school in Donegal] and I loved it...for all the obvious reasons, you know...the pubs and the beauty of the place. But I was just blown away. I was only there two weeks and at the end of two weeks I could say a few things to people [in Irish], and they could understand me and they would actually talk back. It was like: “Oh my God, this is like the real language. This isn’t like a book. This is real. So that kind of blew me away. (Fieldnotes in tir page 1)

Caitlin’s use of the word “real” to highlight her experience with the Irish language in Ireland supports the notion of how enthusiasts perceive of the language as originating in these places.

Jeff, the language teacher from Canada, viewed the *Gaeltachtaí* as the “...place where people go to regenerate their cultural batteries.” He told me he visited the West of Ireland often, specifically to converse with native speakers, to listen and play traditional Irish music, and to enjoy the beauty of the landscape (Fieldnotes in places page 15). He later described the symbolic power of the *Gaeltachtaí* in this way: “To say the word *Gaeltacht* in Ireland is to set a fire,” he explained, “[i]t’s a magical concept and it relates to all of the things people hold most sacred, most important about, not only their heritage but their identity” (Fieldnotes in places page 71).

For many, visiting the fragmented, dislocated, and isolated locales of the West of Ireland and the *Gaeltacht* reinforced the romanticized and mythical visions

they had developed from in their imagined geographies of these places. The scenic beauty of the physical landscape combined with the presence of an Irish-speaking people elevated the experience for those who sought out a more traditional and authentic one.

Nathan visited the Donegal *Gaeltacht* twice in the 1990s (Figure 12); the first time he only stayed for a few days claiming: “I didn’t really know people there but I did feel a...kind of connection.” Four years later he traveled there again, describing his experience in more detail:

I did a course in *Gweedore* [Donegal]; it was very powerful...a very powerful internal experience...I’m still I guess sort of processing it, but I was just really moved, really internally moved like I felt like there was something, it was like a...you know [a] spiritual experience for me. When I first arrived in Galway...the bus we took from Galway to Donegal was run by a group from *Gweedore*, so they spoke Irish. I was sitting next to a police commissioner from...Letterkenny, and we were speaking in Irish the whole time. But then when we went, we passed through those...that *Gaeltacht* there is so isolated..., I don’t know if you’ve visited...or been there? [I nodded yes]. But going through those hills and valleys...and through the little towns...I guess many of which are English-speaking. Then, something about reaching that...outpost...it was like a sense of this language holding on in this outpost, a lot more than in Connemara [Galway *Gaeltacht*], you really, there’s a sense of...Man! [heavy exhaling]. (Fieldnotes in places page 18, 19)

Nathan found his first experience when visiting the *Gaeltacht* to be uneventful, but on his second visit, his conversing in Irish while riding through the Irish countryside greatly enhanced his attachment to the place. Later, once he arrived at the language school, he further described his time there:

[I stayed] ...with a...there was a family, I think four children. They were kind of teenage age, I think ranging from like fifteen, fourteen or fifteen through maybe nineteen or twenty at the time...around there. They were real *Gaelgari* [Irish-speakers], I mean, well, spoke to each other [in Irish] and the dialect you know...but I was just moved.



as a way to encompass the increased number of language enthusiasts who were part of the diaspora outside of Ireland.

### **Roots or Routes?**

Towards the end of each interview I had with a language enthusiast, I asked him or her what they thought about the future of the language and whether they were optimistic about its survival. The answers I received were varied. While some individuals thought that because it was now an official language of Ireland, as well as the European Union (which happened in 2007 and was in the process of being adopted during my fieldwork),<sup>49</sup> that it would continue to thrive, while others were rather pessimistic, thinking that once the *Gaeltachta* disappeared, it no longer survive.

It was the peripheral responses to my question, however, that were most interesting. When I asked Teddy this question as we spoke at the *Daltaí* event in Jamison, Pennsylvania, he questioned the resolve of the language, and yet proposed a unique solution. “It’s hard to say. I would hate to see the *Gaeltacht* disappear. I just think it’s a wonderful thing to be able to go and have that immersion experience,” he said. As we walked outside the camp complex where the event was being held, he spread out his arms saying, but “[h]ere we are in this setting and we have...we’re creating our own *Gaeltacht* [smiling]” (Fieldnotes in places page 26). Teddy’s perspective of the *Gaeltacht* was shared by a few others who thought that their

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<sup>49</sup> *Europa*, the official website of the European Union (<http://europa.eu> (last accessed on 23 October 2009)), lists the twenty-three official languages of the European Union as well as a brief history of each language and the requirement on the part of the EU Publications Office to translate all official documents into the respective languages.

disappearance, at least as a symbol of traditional Irish space, was inevitable, yet they were confident that their replacement would be that of a more embodied space.

This is not a new idea, as geographer Nuala Johnson (1997) concluded her paper on the *Gaeltacht Commission Report (GCR)*, that perhaps a new “[a] new map of the Gaeltacht” was in order, one that shows the Irish speakers who “...extend beyond the boundaries of the West of Ireland or indeed of the state itself to include diaspora in Britain, the United States, Australia and beyond” (188).

Timothy, the native Irish speaker who taught full time in the U.S., shared a similar vision to Teddy’s. Speaking in reference to language enthusiasts everywhere, both inside and outside of Ireland, he felt that the language was perceived by most as being “...locked into [that] location [the *Gaeltacht*]. If you wanted to speak Irish then you go to that sacred site. It’s a linguistic; culturally-specific site which is called the *Gaeltacht*” (Fieldnotes in places page 8).

Many who I spoke with indeed thought of it in this way, and in fact perceived of the West of Ireland in general as a place that held a pure, native, and authentic Irish culture. This was a collective vision shared amongst a large number of language enthusiasts who based their perception on imagined geographies that were produced and reinforced by narratives and performances both in and outside of language events.

Still, others found this vision to be distorted as they were disappointed to find that those Irish in the *Gaeltacht* were more often English speakers than Irish speakers. Michael, who I mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, described for me his experience on the Aran Islands in the Connemara (Galway) *Gaeltacht*:

You go to the...*Gaeltacht*...they don't [speak Irish].... When I went to Ireland for the first time, I made a point of using as much Irish as I could. And the second time and the third time and the fourth time, I used it as much as I could, to the point where when I got to *Inisheer* [*Inis Oirthir* "east island"]—when I stepped off the boat onto Inisheer—I didn't use English. I just used only Irish and then...broken Irish as best I could. But even on the islands, you hear them using the English. You know there's still...it's not as...they just don't use it the way they should do it. The language should be spoken. (Fieldnotes in tst page 24)

As shown previously, most enthusiasts who did travel to Ireland and the *Gaeltacht* did not speak of the prevalence of English in these areas. Rather their experiences reinforced their perception of the place prior to their arrival there, and it was their search for and interaction with native speakers that stimulated and enhanced their experience there.

The meaning of these places, as Nathan previously described as “outposts...like a sense of this language holding on in this...outpost,” relegates these places as relics; soon to be further diminished to a point when they disappear altogether. “I'm not quite sure [that] the traditional way of looking at the *Gaeltacht*—in terms of geography, a physical location—[I'm] not quite sure how practical that is anymore because of globalization.”

Timothy described how he thought the new form of the *Gaeltacht* was evolving into more of an embodied space where the language resided with the individual wherever he or she travelled. He further described this “dynamic” form of the *Gaeltacht* which he felt was already taking shape in Ireland, prompted by the recent addition of a *Gaeltacht* in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He asked rhetorically: Why



couldn't there be "Irish-speaking districts in Belfast, housing estates, halls, and pubs?"<sup>50</sup> He further told me about a recent

editorial in *Beo*, this month's *Beo*—the Irish-language online journal, [when the writer or editor] approaches this question of the new *Gaeltacht* as a global phenomenon...it's all over the world. There's no point talking about it as small regional pockets on the west coast of Ireland. So I think it's...we're inclined to think and discuss the *Gaeltacht* in very much 19<sup>th</sup> century modes where the discourse is racial purity, linguistic purity, and...[a]geographically confined area where you can contain certain types, certain individuals, and you can pigeonhole them with certain forms of behavior and that they dress...they're expected to dress in certain fashion, speak in a certain way, behave in a certain way, hold certain values, and certain...moral and religious values. Those rigid formulations are no longer valid. (Fieldnotes in places page 5, 6)

Others too felt that the definition and meaning of the *Gaeltacht* was in need of reevaluation. Patricia, a language learner from Ontario, felt that "[e]veryone has a different idea of what the *Gaeltacht* is," further explaining:

The way that I look at it is what we have right now is a transient *Gaeltacht* [referring to the Irish Immersion Weekend] that you know when people come together...this is as good as you get in any *Gaeltacht* in Ireland. The opportunity to bump into somebody and speak Irish to... [or] to do some business, anything in Irish, ...it's here. And it's in Esopus. It's in Ottawa, and it's in Montréal. And so I'm saying this is a transient or temporary *Gaeltacht*. (Fieldnotes in places page 69, 70)

In fact, Teddy remembered while growing up that even at that time, which was in the 1960s, a number of "*lán Gaeilge*"<sup>51</sup> "mini-Gaeltachts" existed throughout

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<sup>50</sup> I was told by one language teacher in Ireland of the recent creation of the *Gaeltacht Quarter* in West Belfast. He was amazed, as the political implications of having an Irish-speaking area in the North of Ireland is highly controversial since it represents the Catholic and Republican side of the historic conflict there (Fieldnotes in places 36).

<sup>51</sup> Here, I believe the word *lán* is meant to be "full," or the adjective *lánaimseartha* or "full-time." I believe he means to say they spoke Irish constantly in the house.

Ireland located in people's households, which he described as self-contained homes of Irish speakers where "...maybe they connect[ed] with many families in the town who were also *lán Gaeilge*." In essence, perhaps the space of the *Gaeltacht* has always, in practice, been located in a less generalized or "modern" sense (Johnson 1997).

The concept of an Irish-speaking place existing in Ireland, however, helps most enthusiasts with developing a sense of comfort and security. Massey (Cresswell 2004, 66 quoting Massey 1994), reasons that "...the search after the 'real' meanings of place, the unearthing of heritages and so forth, is interpreted as being, in part, a response to a desire for fixity and for security of identity in the middle of all the movement and change," and, therefore "[a] 'sense of place', of rootedness, can provide—in this form and on this interpretation—stability and a source of unproblematic identity" (66).

Regardless of how Ireland and the *Gaeltacht* are perceived by language enthusiasts, it is the meaning they vest in these places that most matters. I argued in this chapter that language enthusiasts construct an imagined geography of Ireland as a home place through their interpretations of textual images and performances either acted out or witnessed in the form of oral traditions and narratives or through performances of music, dance, and language.

Language enthusiasts are creating and utilizing Irish-like places in a number of ways, whether we converse in Irish with our language groups at the local pub or take part in a number of ephemeral events—a music *seisiún*, *céilí* dance, a Saint Patrick's Day parade, or a language event—the construction of an Irish identity remains a dynamic and fluid process and so does the construction of imagined

geographies in attaching to place. To conclude this chapter, I argue that language enthusiasts are living as contemporary examples of Hall's (2000) diaspora because of their creative and optional ways of connecting to place. Although many do have the perception that Ireland is a place that contains a pure and authentic form of Irish culture, it is the flexible way they attach to this idea that is fluid and dynamic.

I conclude this dissertation by summarizing the individual chapters and explaining how the content of each involved one component in an individual's construction of a contemporary Irish American identity. This dissertation comprises much of my own story, one that was influenced by a number of other enthusiasts along the way, and therefore I finish by providing a personal assessment of my ethnic identity.

## Chapter Nine: Conclusion

### My Traditional and Authentic Irishness

Thinking back over on my twelve months or more of fieldwork, one of the most memorable occasions for me was the evening I spent at the Sicilian “Pub” in Milwaukee (which I mentioned in chapter four).

Prior to arriving at the bar

that evening, I was invited to at a bar-be-cue sponsored by some of the local *Conradh na Gaelige* (the local branch of the Gaelic League) people, where I met dozens of individuals who were active in promoting Irish music, language, and dance in the Milwaukee area. While there, I spoke to a couple who told me that their niece had just returned from Butte, Montana, where, as a member of the Trinity Dancers, she performed at *An Rí Rá*—the Montana Irish Festival (Figure 12).<sup>52</sup> I remarked how the North American dance and language groups—at least from my observations—consisted in many ways of an extended network of mutual acquaintances. We agreed,



**Figure 12** - Trinity Dancers at *An Rí Rá* - Montana Irish Festival in Uptown Butte, Montana in August of 2006 (source: photograph by author).

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<sup>52</sup>Although I was instrumental in organizing the first three Irish festivals in Missoula, Montana, the event was moved to Butte in 2001 where it is now organized through a festival coordinator who works for the Montana Gaelic Cultural Society.

reviewing the names of those who we knew at the party who we had met through our learning of the Irish language.

It was getting late, about eleven p.m., and I was ready to return to the UWM campus and my dormitory room. A few of the others needed a ride back to the city



**Figure 13-** Late night *seisiún* at the Sicilian Pub in Milwaukee (source: photograph by author).

as they wished to be at the Sicilian bar near the school to participate in the late-night festivities there; I offered to drive them. In my rental car there sat three All-Ireland *sean nós* singers and a Donegal fiddle player—all fluent Irish speakers.

Over the course of the next

half-hour driving back towards campus, we laughed, sharing stories and they made fun of my Irish that I tried on them. They said they were impressed with my learning Irish, and I was happy to hear this, hoping they meant it.

When I arrived at the front of the bar, they slowly got out of the car and insisted I come in and sit with them. Tired, but not wanting to miss an opportunity, I decided to join them, so I parked nearby and walked back to the bar. By this time, a number of those who were at the bar-be-cue were gathered around a table in the rear of the place, where, to my surprise, they saved me a seat. They greeted me with nods and continued on with telling stories, singing songs, drinking beer, and playing music (Figure 11). At this moment I remembered feeling “really” Irish. Although I did not

contribute any song or story to this *seisiún*, I felt welcomed as part of this circle, a community consisting of what I envisioned to be a traditional and authentic mix of Irish culture that included music, song, and storytelling which was tied altogether with the Irish language.

Throughout my field work, and brought into sharper focus as I recollect the time in the Sicilian bar that night, I understood that a network of Irish-identifying people exists in North America where individuals are tied together through their participation in perceived traditional Irish expressions—music, dance and language.

Additionally, I realized that a powerful link exists between us here (the diaspora) and those Irish in Ireland (native Irish) through the medium of language and other perceived traditional forms of Irish cultural expressions. I enjoyed, for those few hours, being one of them. I felt as if there was not a cultural boundary, we were all simply Irish.

Over the past decade or more, as my involvement with the Irish language and other things perceived to be Irish has grown and changed, I've experienced a number of situations like the one at the Sicilian bar that evening, except that more recently, my understanding of the messages and meanings conveyed by these activities has changed dramatically. When, in the early 1990s, I began to develop an interest in my own Irish identity, I was at first a casual participant—"professional Irish," as those I interviewed would say (see chapter six)—engaged chiefly in Saint Patrick's Day activities.

By the late 1990s, after completing my Master of Arts degree, I became more knowledgeable about the Irish language eventually visiting Ireland where I took an

inventory of the *Gaeltachai*, a trip I hoped would lay the groundwork for my future dissertation work (see chapter two). I subsequently formed the Montana Gaelic Cultural Society, sponsored language-immersion events in Missoula, Butte, and Helena, Montana, and created the Montana Irish Festival. By the end of the 1990s I was no longer a casual participant in things Irish, and had vested significant time, money, and energy in identity and connecting to my own perceived Irish ancestry (and also helping others in Montana to connect to theirs).

But even though I had gathered knowledge *about* being Irish, I was not aware of what it really meant for me *to be* Irish. That was something I came to understand, and learned to think critically about, only through my PhD course work and dissertation research over the past five and one-half years, coming gradually to see more richly not only why others strove to construct their Irish identities, but also why I too was interested in this process. Important, in reflecting back over the chapters of this dissertation, is how I came to construct my own identity based on my, and others' perceptions of traditional Irish expressions.

In this conclusion I briefly review the chapters comprising my dissertation which, when added together, demonstrate how we, as contemporary white ethnics, design and construct our Irish identities. I follow up this review by looking at how the meaning of identity and place is defined by metaphors of mobility and dynamism that contrast the fixed and static notions of tradition and authenticity.

### **My Dissertation Review**

This dissertation has already included ample segments of my own narrative in autoethnographic form. Writing these stories (first in field notes and memos, later in

chapters) over the past two years has caused me to think about myself in ways I never had before, and never would have otherwise, in particular how I developed components of my own Irish identity. In going through this process I have written not just a dissertation, but have literally also rewritten my own life. This is not in the sense that I invented a new history, but rather how I came to see identity, my own included, as an active construction. While before beginning my doctoral work I had an idea of documenting Irish language use in North America, I now see Irish language learning as a journey in identity construction.

I described my fieldwork in chapter two as both multisited and autoethnographic. The former was pre-determined as I had proposed my sites to be located in a number of places; however, the latter was less visible, and only surfaced later when I began to understand the extent to which my study included me. Although I knew upon entering into the field that I would be an insider (see DeLyser 2001), it was the trials and tribulations of language use and group inclusion that made my study autoethnographic.

Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997) would have labeled me “a boundary-crosser” (3), someone who takes on a dual identity yet pushes beyond the binary of insider and outsider. In a world of displacement and globalization, “[t]he ability to transcend everyday conceptions of selfhood and social life is related to the ability to write or do autoethnography,” she writes, pointing out that “[t]his is a postmodern condition [and] [i]t involves a rewriting of the self and the social” (4). Indeed, I now look back to see myself both literally and figuratively “rewriting” myself and the social throughout this document and the process I went through to create it. In fact, the



writing process itself has allowed me to literally open up through text, while the understanding of the social through autoethnography I think shows a more reflexive approach to uncovering the messages and meaning behind identity construction.

Initially, in order to understand how the Irish created an identity in North America, I first needed to know more about how this process evolved. In chapter three, I used the work of historians and sociologists to trace how the Irish began as an immigrant group, developed into an ethnic group, and finally progressed into a more individualized identity—a symbolic ethnicity. My family on my father’s side has been in America for one-hundred and sixty-five years, and therefore we ourselves progressed through these stages—as I have shown in this work, I have traced myself and my own ancestors through the same stages of identification. My father’s family came as “Famine Irish,” eventually coalesced with other Irish families in Montana—all American-born—and after a period of perceived assimilation, I now exercise a symbolic form of Irishness, linking consciously back to an Ireland I have never lived in, but have always nevertheless known as home.

Over the period of my life, I witnessed how my father maintained group cohesion through his friendship with others of Irish ancestry, while also continuing a strong affiliation with the Catholic Church. We did not live in an Irish neighborhood, or the town of Butte—“Ireland’s Fifth Province” (Everett 2000), but instead we lived amongst those, who I would have considered the American mainstream. For me (as for many of those I interviewed), my affiliation with others of (perceived) Irish descent is culturally based, centered on the language, as well as music and dance. Although sociologists and historians argue that white ethnics like

me no longer need to belong to communities in order for the process of identity construction to occur, I disagree, claiming that indeed these groups still exist, they are just in different forms.

Where these communities exist, however, is in ephemeral spaces—places I discussed in detail throughout chapter four. Coming together at transient events is ideal for most of us interested in the Irish language. In my case my daily life involved working full-time, writing, raising children (high-school kids no less), building houses, watching kids’ hockey games and cross-country meets, and all of this left little time for me to foster my Irish ethnicity. The language event, therefore, provided a place for gathering together with others with a common goal, to learn Irish and be with those who share similar interests.

Yet the event also serves as a place to introduce and reinforce attributes and parameters of Irish identity. Catholic mass, the *céilí* and *seisiún*—often including *sean nós* singing and the March—each contributed to my sense of what was traditional Irish culture. Further, as I wrote in chapter four, these performances and activities acted to transform these spaces. Not so much in making me feel I was in Ireland, but symbolically as a place for the gathering of people with similar interests in building community. The *seisiún* at the Sicilian bar showed this: it transformed the meaning of the place into an Irish place for a few hours, and provided in particular a space where I was able to feel “truly” Irish for a short time.

Understanding how I fashioned myself part of an Irish community, one that comes together sporadically in order to share similar interests, I thought about how I had arrived at this point where I was interested in the language. In chapter five, I

detailed some of the many stories I collected about how enthusiasts found their way to Irish language classes and immersion weekends following their being exposed to popular forms of Irish music and dance. I, on the other hand, was drawn to it following an interest in Irish history—in an academic way.

I remember not knowing an Irish language existed until I stumbled across a history text—R.F. Foster’s *Modern Ireland* (1988)—where a one-page map showed four periods in Irish history that traced the decline of the language (see Johnson 1997; and chapter eight).<sup>53</sup> For me, the language, initially, was a curiosity and Irish music and dance I saw as mostly as a supplement for my Irish-language events.

The recognition, however, that expressing an Irish identity was becoming popular, surfaced only after I placed an advertisement in the local paper announcing the first Irish-immersion weekend in Montana in 1998. Within a week, I had eighteen signed up for the event and found myself scrambling to accommodate the unexpected turn out. A following event—the first language-immersion weekend in Butte, Montana—attracted over sixty people and included a children’s class.

The popularity of language events, however, can be misconstrued. In regard to commercialization and commodification of Irish cultural expressions and some scholars’ ideas that contemporary white identities are highly individualized, I can see how some individuals could be seen to practice an identity based on consumption. However, it is those who remain committed to the language and are active in the building of a community of speakers who I argue are beyond these more individualized notions of identity.

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<sup>53</sup> This map comes from another book I read during my Master’s thesis work—*An atlas of Irish history* (Edwards 1973).

In chapter six, I addressed the ways in which enthusiasts chose and further developed parameters for their Irish identities which they subsequently performed through a number of activities. In my own case, I was born into the Irish diaspora in the 1960s, growing up and living a childhood that included some of the subtleties of what I understood as Irish life. The Catholic Church was then for me a duty, something I immediately dropped once I was on my own, which, as I look back, was the last relic of my father's generation that held for him a symbol of his Irish identity. When I was younger, our town of Missoula did not have a Saint Patrick's Day parade (this did not come along until the late 1990s), and I do not recollect my father ever celebrating that day other than wearing a piece of green clothing. In essence, my childhood and early adulthood were largely void of what I would consider expressions of my Irish past.

More recently, however, I, along with a host of others who are learning the language, began to practice an optional form of ethnicity. Perhaps a sign of our possessing more leisure time, in conjunction with forces of globalization and the influx of other immigrant groups (see Nash 2002), we now construct group parameters of belonging that are based on perceived traditional and authentic ideas of Irish culture.

Choosing to be Irish and expressing it through the language can be further enhanced (as it has been in my case) by constructing an Irish heritage—the primary theme of chapter seven. In the beginning of that chapter I wrote my own family narrative, a story largely constructed from a conglomeration of family stories, personal experiences, and published histories. Still today I find comfort in knowing

my family history (at least that on my father's side) and I am proud that we are both Irish and Montanan.

I also understand, now every more clearly, however, that much of this history is based on speculation. I know my ancestry to be Irish, but only one strand of my genealogy is so. All this focus on the Irish has caused me to largely ignore my mother's side, and further, a number of other networks that likely complicate my tie to an Irish identity and Ireland itself. Those other networks would be prevalent if I were to more comprehensively and less selectively trace my family history.

Strangely, I have no interest in knowing this, and never have. Instead, I am content in knowing the history I wrote in chapter seven. In essence, I am satisfied to know I am from Ireland despite knowing that this Irish ancestry is a construction I myself have worked to shape. Like many of the people I interviewed in this dissertation, I have chosen to focus on just one aspect of my family's past, have labored to make that part of my present and future, and have gained strong feelings of connection to a perceived past through doing so.

So, in chapter eight, I emphasized how enthusiasts (like me) often construct imagined geographies of Ireland in order to create and maintain a connection to Ireland. I know two things about myself in regard to my Irish identity. I wish to be a fluent speaker of Irish, and I want to live in the *Gaeltacht* in the summer. This is, and long has been, my dream. Still now, when I daydream, I oftentimes think of Ireland. I imagine myself there, riding my bike along the dangerously narrow roads that crisscross the rocky, green, and desolate landscape of the West. I see myself renting a small summer cottage in *Gleann Cholm Cille*, in Donegal, where I imagine myself

working on my next research project. I will stop in at the pub each evening as a break from my studies, to converse in Irish with my Irish-speaking friends.

This goal is not a dream in the sense of a false reality. Instead, it serves to lead my own conception (one that I share with many of enthusiasts I interviewed) that the *Gaeltacht* and Ireland itself are places that to me represent the traditional and authentic culture that I have pictured and made real for myself through a number of means—textbooks, stories, and my travel there. These images together help me to maintain a powerful, personally felt connection to Ireland.

The ways in which I developed this aspiring-Irish identity has been expressed through the words and phrases written in these chapters, each one showing at least a portion of how this construction occurred (for me and for those I interviewed). How I was introduced to the language, the way I adopted parameters of my Irishness, the development of my heritage, and the means for attaching myself to Ireland, have all been revealed in these pages. But I next wish to further show how I have grown through this experience, and how I have come to better understand the messages and meanings of this process.

### **My Life in the Diaspora**

I gave up ownership of a successful business and risked a wonderful marriage to get to this point right now—typing the last few paragraphs of this dissertation. When I go backward in time, I find that I organize my life into five-year increments—or close to five years anyway (this dissertation will have been five and one-half in the making)—when at the end of these epochs, I become restless and in need of a change. While others hesitate to make moves that may jeopardize their

finances or family life, rather, I feel secure when things are in flux. This is not to say my life lacks a plan or any organization, as I take pride in these attributes about myself, but it does mean that the notion of security is itself a construction that means different things to different people.

Along these same lines, I became aware that littered throughout the text of this dissertation are words that infer mobility and fluidity, one perhaps in some ways contrived. Ephemeral, optional, flexible, invented, commercial, consumption, imagined, perception, and a host of others with similar connotations, can depict a sense of artificiality, or a façade.

Two years ago, when I began writing, I was thinking that enthusiasts such as myself were maybe creating a sort of artificial and fake identity, at best distant copies of the real thing. I, in fact, began reading the works of Jean Baudrillard (1988, 2006) and Umberto Eco (1983), both postmodernists, who are critical of such representations, especially the proliferation of the fake, which they argue is prevalent in America. Although intriguing and brilliant work, I found these ideas unsettling because I did not feel they adequately described the powerful emotions I possessed regarding my Irish identity.

In addition and following my reading of dozens of scholarly articles and book chapters on subjects such as autoethnography, Irish history, commercial and commodified cultures, performance, ethnic options, space and place, heritage, and imagined geographies, I have come to understand how my own identity is itself a construction that remains in constant flux.

What is most important amongst us language enthusiasts is the feeling of being Irish. Even though I now know more about the construction of my identity (which is largely based on a number of inventions and imagined geographies), I still remain connected to Ireland. The constructedness of that connection means very little to me. When at the pub that night, I felt, I really felt, at least for a few hours, how close I was to being Irish. Indeed I, along with those enthusiasts that took part in my study, have collectively developed parameters of what we have come to define as traditional and authentic Irishness (refer to DeLyser 1999 concerning the construction of authenticity).

When I read Stuart Hall's (2000) chapter "New cultures for old" in Massey and Jess's (2000) book *A place in the world?*, I was excited; as it seemed to fit perfectly with how I felt about the construction of identity. His re-conceptualized definition of culture and diaspora through the promotion of a multiplicity of cultural attributes, homes, and networks, helped me to understand these complicated issues concerning tradition and authenticity. He brought into the conversation other common terms that I found throughout my dialogue with others—imagined communities, imagined geographies, nationalism, routes, roots, and tradition—"the changing same" (see Gilroy 1993)—and he tied all of these ideas into the concept of diaspora. Hall (2000), describing Gilroy's work concerning music of the Black Caribbean diaspora, writes:

...if you wanted to tell the story of black music, you wouldn't construct a story of how "authentic" black music *started* in Africa and became diluted with each subsequent transformation—the blues, reggae, Afro-Cuban, jazz, soul and rap—all representing "loss of tradition" the further the music gets dispersed from its *roots*. Instead, you would have to pay attention to the way black music has travelled across and around the diaspora by many, overlapping *routes*. (207, his emphasis)



This dynamic idea of diaspora helps to explain how those of us who consider ourselves Irish, yet know we are not “really Irish”—connecting ourselves to an Irish past that never fully existed, and to images of Ireland that can never have been real—still maintain an identity based on our own group’s understandings of tradition and authenticity.

Still, and as I bring this dissertation to a close, there remains the lingering question of “why” do I, as well as all the others that comprised my research study, continue to design, construct, maintain, and perform an Irish identity despite our distance from it, both generationally and geographically? Why do we insist on inventing and emphasizing our Irish pasts and perceived connection to our ancestral home of Ireland knowing we are not “really” Irish nor is Ireland our real home?

For most enthusiasts, a gap had formed between their Irish ancestral past and the present, interrupted by their need to assimilate, or, it was a period in their lives when their ethnicity was secondary to more important concerns. When the time did come, however, the void that separated their past from the present was bridged by the building of personal narratives and imagined connection to place.

The language provided a means for building this bridge, first, because it was perceived as a traditional form and primary identifier of Irish culture, and second, it was the catalyst for the formation of a community. Within this community were those who performed their identities self consciously, playing the roles and following the scripts that helped for them to construct their ethnicity—learning a minimal amount of Irish, playing the fiddle, and drinking Guinness, for example. Others became fluent speakers and strived to be as Irish as they could be, sometimes the

result was exhaustion when enthusiasts were overloaded with acting Irish and could no longer keep up, suffering from a sort of role fatigue.

However at other times the role-playing exercises also evolved into habitual acts or unconscious actions. Indeed, these perceived Irish identifiers, such as language fluency, became performative for enthusiasts when they no longer worked at them consciously and instead adopted them as part of their everyday lives, as in one case when a woman told me she even dreamed in Irish. Yet while some enthusiasts may have indeed developed habitual forms of perceived Irish norms and practices, the flexibility inherent with their optional ethnicity means that their identities also remain always unfinished. Rather than wearing one mask, they have the ability to jump in and out of their ethnic roles whenever they wish.

Many enthusiasts told me they did not care whether they became fluent speakers or not, while others filled their days with Irish-like activities, only to eventually take a vacation from an overdose of these same activities. Some cherished the flexibility of their Irish identities, enjoying the challenge of an identity always in the making, always ready for the next language event.

For me, I am satisfied that my motive for designing an Irish identity lies with a desire to belong to a community and the challenges associated with developing my own level of Irishness. In an optional ethnicity like my Irishness, identity construction is never complete, for to complete it would mean there was no longer a need for the very workshops upon which that identity was significantly founded. At one time, Irish immigrants in North America created charitable and benevolent societies to help immigrants adjust. In the twenty-first century, the descendants of

those immigrants have different needs for connection. In the absence of close-knit urban ethnic communities (in an increasingly secular world) Irish-language enthusiasts elect to gather at language weekends, building for themselves the kinds of communities, and the kinds of identities they believe their ancestors shared.

In regards to my work and the contribution it makes to geography in general, I have come to understand how the combination of autoethnography and ethnography, when blended together through personal narrative and the stories from others, adds to a fledgling body of literature within our discipline. My engagement with autoethnography also lends itself to the use of performance and performativity as a means to understand how individuals construct ethnicities. Within cultural geography, the construction of ethnicity—in this work involving the processes of consumption, heritage, and attachment to place—has rarely, if ever, been viewed through the lens of performance theory, and therefore I would hope that this dissertation contributes in some way to this facet of our subdiscipline. In addition, geographers have always been interested in the study of place and therefore my work here continues on with this theme, albeit in a contemporary sense, through my engagement with the idea of diaspora that stresses the dynamic nature of people and their attachment to place.

With that said, in the end this was for me a successful journey.<sup>54</sup> I am often surprised at the number of people, mostly acquaintances and friends, who tell me

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<sup>54</sup> In finishing up my narrative, my story, I am reminded of a passage in anthropologist Miles Richardson's (2003) text *Being-in-Christ and putting death in its place*, that I read a few years ago that left such a profound imprint on me, that I feel it fitting to mention it here. In the introduction he writes about his mother's tragic death, and in the epilogue, his father's death, in an incredibly subtle and yet

they wished they could do what I did—quit their jobs and pursue a different path. In fact, I am equally taken-aback upon hearing about all the unhappiness in their lives, as Ginny, my wife, and I are subjected to a steady stream of news from friends and neighbors who have lost their jobs or are divorcing. “Did you make the right choice? Are you happy?” they ask me. “Yes, of course,” I reply. “How do you know?” They ask. Without hesitating, I know: “Because I no longer wake up every morning with butterflies in my stomach,” I answer.

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immensely powerful way. His way of combining a compelling personal narrative with empirical thought serves as a guide for my work here, as well as my future endeavors.

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**Appendix**  
**Immersion Event Itineraries, Language School Brochures, and Posters**

# LEARN IRISH!

## Irish Language Immersion Weekend

Friday, October 20<sup>th</sup> through Sunday October 22<sup>nd</sup>  
2006

Cathedral of St. Helena – Parish Offices (School)  
530 North Ewing Street  
Helena, Montana

Fáilte! (Welcome!)

Deadline for signup is Monday October 18! Please register EARLY as there are a limited number of spaces available.

Questions? Contact Tom Sullivan  
Language Coordinator/Montana Gaelic Cultural Society  
at (406) 396-7229 or email: sullyman142003@yahoo.com

Details and Registration Information—go to:  
[www.mgcsonline.com](http://www.mgcsonline.com)

**MONTANA GAELIC CULTURAL SOCIETY**  
**WWW.MGCSONLINE.COM**

## **IRISH LANGUAGE IMMERSION WEEKEND**

Friday, February 3rd through Sunday February 5th

St. Joseph's School  
503 Edith Street  
Missoula, Montana

### **Irish Language Immersion Weekends**

**Fáilte! (Welcome!)** The Irish language immersion weekends began in Missoula in 1997, with a group of twenty, innocent souls and an Irish language instructor from Co. Donegal, Liam Ó Cuinneagáin, the founder of Oideas Gael, an Irish language school in Donegal, Ireland. This group of first-timers subsequently founded the Montana Gaelic Cultural Society which has subsequently sponsored numerous events throughout the State of Montana including language immersion weekends, regular classes in Irish, an annual Irish festival, Irish dance classes, and music sessions. These weekends are patterned after those held throughout this country, especially those of *Daltaí na Gaeilge* (Students of Irish), on the east coast. Our instructors are fluent speakers and come from all areas of the U.S. and Ireland.

The weekend gives those with no experience in Irish a base for learning, as well as fluent speakers the opportunity to improve their skills. Language classes are specially designed depending on the language level of each student. The student is grouped according to their ability and matched with an instructor that best fits their level. There are generally three to four skill levels depending upon the number of attendees, and we take great care to place each participant in the proper level.

The schedule consists of intensive morning and afternoon tutorials with attention directed toward spoken Irish. The goal is to foster conversational ability and fluency. Of course, not all is work as social activities such as dance, music, and singing fill in between language sessions, giving one ample opportunity to use your new skills!

We also recommend that you bring pen or pencil, notebook, and comfortable shoes (for dancing) to the course.

MISSOULA IRISH IMMERSION WEEKEND  
FEBRUARY 3-5, 2006

**REGISTRATION FORM**

(This form can be completed online at [www.mgcsonline.com](http://www.mgcsonline.com))

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_@\_\_\_\_\_

**Information to help us place you in the correct level of class.**

Do you currently attend classes? \_\_\_\_\_ Where? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you self-taught? \_\_\_\_\_

Level in Irish: How long have you studied Irish?

No previous study \_\_\_ Months \_\_\_ Years \_\_\_

Ability: On a scale of (just beginning) 1 – 10 (fluent)

How do you rate your level of Irish? \_\_\_\_\_

Please mark off all of the following that pertain to your Irish level skills:

Odd words and phrases \_\_\_ Can understand a bit \_\_\_ Can speak a little \_\_\_

Can read and write a little \_\_\_ Very simple conversation \_\_\_

Can read and write better than converse \_\_\_

Some fluency: Can converse for 5-10 minutes \_\_\_ Fluent \_\_\_

My preference:

Conversation is most important \_\_\_ Grammar is more important \_\_\_ Prefer a mix \_\_\_

Go raibh maith agat!

**Mail this Form to:**

Tom Sullivan

Language Coordinator/MGCS

727 Jackson Street

Missoula, MT 59802

Please mail in order for me to receive by January 30<sup>th</sup>. Call me if this is a problem!!





**20TH ANNIVERSARY**  
*milwaukee irish fest*  
**SUMMER SCHOOL**  
*scoil samhraidh fleadh éireannach*

**SUNDAY thru FRIDAY**  
**AUGUST 13-18, 2006**

*Fáilte Romhat Arís Chuig Scoil Samhraidh*

Presented by  
MILWAUKEE IRISH FEST in cooperation with  
THE COLLEGE OF LETTERS AND SCIENCE  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE

UW-Milwaukee provides equal opportunities in employment and programming including Title IX requirements.

**Thank you to Irish Fest Summer School Staff:**

- Denise Benoit • UWM Liaison Barb Breed-Heidt • Gretta Comiskey •
- Mary Hippler • Mary Beth Holloway • Kristina Paris • Kristine Pluskota • Pat Sadowski •
- Kathy Kean Schultz • Marna Gibbons Starr • Mary Jane Tulley • Nancy Madden Walczyk •
- Jane Walrath • Brian Witt • Joanne & John Woodford •

**And a loving farewell to Mary Lou Heck.**

**An Doine** (FRIDAY)

- 5:00 - 8:00 Registration - Halla Ethel  
 8:00 - 8:30 Crash Phrase Course - Halla Bharra  
 8:30 - 9:15 Singing Workshop - Halla Bharra  
 9:30 - 10:00 Cruinniú (General Meeting) - Halla Ethel  
 10:00 Seisiún - Halla Ethel

**An Satharn** (SATURDAY)

- 8:00 - 8:45 Bricfeasta - Halla Bia  
 9:00 - 10:45 Ranganna Gaeilge (Language Classes)  
 11:00 - 12:00 Rang Damhsa (Irish Céili Dancing Class) - Halla Bharra  
 Rang Feadóige (Tin Whistle Class) Green Lounge - Coleman Hall  
 Irish Calligraphy - (As Used in the Book of Kells) - Arts Center "C"  
 Conversation Workshops - Must sign-up in advance:  
     Lower Intermediate - Main Lounge - Coleman Hall  
     More Advanced Intermediate - Arts Center "A"  
 12:15 - 1:00 Lón - Halla Bia  
 1:00 - 1:30 Duine ar Dhuine (One-on-One) - Halla Bia ar dtús  
 Crash Phrase Course Part II (True Beginners) - Halla Bia ar dtús  
 1:45 - 3:15 Ranganna Gaeilge (Language Classes)  
 3:30 - 4:30 Rang Damhsa (Irish Seit Dancing Class) - Halla Bharra  
 Rang Bodhráin ("Irish Drum" Class) Arts Center "A"  
 An Chláirseach (The Irish Harp) Main Lounge - Coleman Hall  
 "An Caighdeáin Oifigiúil agus Lárchánúint dhon Ghaeilge" - Lúcas Ó Catháin - Halla Ethel  
 5PM  
 5:30 - 6:15 Dinnéar - Halla Bia  
 6:30 - 7:15 Aifreann as Gaeilge/Béarla (Mass in Irish & English) - An t-Ath. Charles Hagan - Halla Ethel  
 7:30 - 8:30 Seisiún - Halla Ethel  
 8:45 - 12:00 Céili Mór - Hall Bharra

**An Domhnach** (SUNDAY)

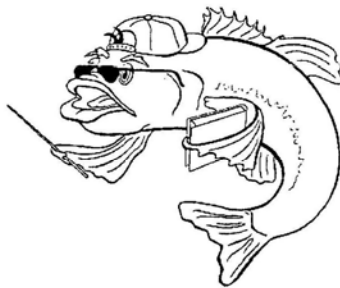
- 8:30 - 9:15 Bricfeasta - Halla Bia  
 9:30 - 11:00 Ranganna Gaeilge (Language Classes)  
 11:15 - 12:00 Cruinniú Mór - Halla Ethel

# Daltaí na Gaeilge

## Irish Language Immersion Weekend

in Jamison, PA (Bucks County)

FRIDAY evening NOVEMBER 10<sup>th</sup>  
through  
SUNDAY afternoon NOVEMBER 12<sup>th</sup>



Join Daltaí na Gaeilge for the Final Immersion Weekend of 2006

### ***The Return to Jamison***

- ❖ Classes for everyone, from Total Beginners to Daoine Líofa
- ❖ Workshops in music, dance and Irish Conversation
- ❖ Lectures in both Irish and English
- ❖ Sat. evening Mass in Irish for those who wish to attend
- ❖ Seisiún and Céilí Mór Saturday night, with live music

Weekend includes lodging & meals from Sat. breakfast thru Sun. lunch

***Bí linn ! Join Us !***

For additional information and / or Registration form  
Visit us on our Website at

COIRN IARRATAIS  
2007  
RESERVATION FORM

# Oideas Gael 2007

Courses for Adults in Irish Language & Culture

Cúrsaí Teanga & Cultúir do Dhaoine Fásta



Oideas Gael, Gleann Cholm Cille, Co. Dhún na nGall, Éire.  
 Fón: + 353 (0)74 97 30 248 Facs: + 353 (0)74 97 30 348  
 Email: oideasgael@eircom.net www.Oideas-Gael.com





Daltaí Events 2007

- 16-18 FEBRUARY** Irish Immersion Weekend  
Esopus, NY
- 18-19 FEBRUARY** Teachers' Workshop  
Esopus, NY
- 13-15 APRIL** Plúiné Spóscaráil Weekend  
Long Beach Islands, NJ
- 1-May** Scholarship Devotion
- 11-13 May** Irish Immersion Weekend  
Esopus, NY
- 26-May** Irish Saturday  
Conshohocken, PA
- Saturday  
Early August** Daltaí Picnic  
Oceanside, NJ
- 28 August -  
1-Sep** Irish Immersion Week  
Esopus, NY
- 9-11 November** Irish Immersion  
Jenison, PA

Learn more and register at [www.gelt.ie/events/2007.html](http://www.gelt.ie/events/2007.html).

MONTANA GAELIC CULTURAL SOCIETY  
www.mgcsonline.com

## Irish Language Immersion Weekend

Friday, October 20<sup>th</sup> through Sunday October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2006

Cathedral of St. Helena – Parish Offices (School)  
530 North Ewing Street  
Helena, MT 59601

### Irish Language Immersion Weekends

**Fáilte! (Welcome!)** The Irish language immersion weekends began in Missoula in 1997, with a group of twenty, innocent souls and an Irish language instructor from Co. Donegal, Liam Ó Cuinneagáin, the founder of Oideas Gael, an Irish language school in Donegal, Ireland. This group of first-timers subsequently founded the Montana Gaelic Cultural Society which has subsequently sponsored numerous events throughout the State of Montana including language immersion weekends, regular classes in Irish, an annual Irish festival, Irish dance classes, and music sessions. These weekends are patterned after those held throughout this country, especially those of *Daltaí na Gaeilge* (Students of Irish), on the east coast. **Our instructors are fluent speakers and come from all areas of the U.S. and Ireland.**

The weekend gives those with no experience in Irish a base for learning, as well as fluent speakers the opportunity to improve their skills. Language classes are specially designed depending on the language level of each student. The student is grouped according to their ability and matched with an instructor that best fits their level. There are generally three to four skill levels depending upon the number of attendees, and we take great care to place each participant in the proper level.

The schedule consists of intensive morning and afternoon tutorials with attention directed toward spoken Irish. The goal is to foster conversational ability and fluency. Of course, not all is work as social activities such as dance, music, and singing fill in between language sessions, giving one ample opportunity to use your new skills!

We also recommend that you bring pen or pencil, notebook, and comfortable shoes (for dancing) to the course.

## Fees

(These fees include both a light breakfast (with coffee and rolls) and lunch--on Saturday and Sunday)

MGCS Members	\$100.00
Adults (non-members)	\$115.00 (Reference the website for membership fees)
Students (College or HS)	\$75.00

**Deadline for Fees\* is Monday October 16, there are NO REFUNDS! Please register EARLY as there are a limited number of spaces available!**

\*You can pay fees with a check or cash, send to:

Tom Sullivan

Language Coordinator/MGCS

727 Jackson Street

Missoula, MT 59802

Questions? Call Tom @ (406) 396-7229 or email: [sullyman142003@yahoo.com](mailto:sullyman142003@yahoo.com)

## Preliminary Agenda

(This agenda is subject to change)

### FRIDAY

**Check-In Time 6:00 to 7:00 PM** on Friday, October 20<sup>th</sup> – Cathedral of St. Helena—Parish Offices—East side entrance (Park between the Parish Offices and the Cathedral).

7:00 PM – 8:15 PM	Introduction and Speaker (Classroom)
8:15 PM – 9:45 PM	Irish Class (Divide up into assigned classrooms)
10:00 PM - on	Informal get-together/Seisiún @ <b>Bert and Ernie's</b>

### SATURDAY:

9:00 – 10:00 AM	Breakfast includes rolls, coffee, juice
10:00– 1 PM	Language Class w/short break (Classroom)
1:00 – 2:00 PM	Lunch
2:00 – 3:30 PM	Language Session
3:30 – 5 PM	Talk on Computer Programs (Classroom); Movies (Classroom) and Dance Workshop ( <b>Bert and Ernie's</b> )
5:00 – 6:30 PM	Dinner (on your own— <b>Bert and Ernie's</b> )
6:30 PM to 8:00 PM	Language Session
8:30 PM - ON	Céilí (Party!) Dance, Music, Skits, Song ( <b>Bert and Ernie's</b> )

### SUNDAY

9:00 – 10:00 AM	Breakfast includes rolls, coffee, juice (Irish Mass TBA)
10:00 – 1:00 PM	Language Session w/short break
1:00 PM	Final Group Meeting and dismissal/Lunch

## Vita

Tom Sullivan is a fifth-generation Montanan, although born in Minot, North Dakota, in 1963, he grew up in Missoula, Montana, where he currently resides. He graduated from Montana State University in civil engineering in 1987 and subsequently worked as a structural engineer, eventually owning his own firm, which he sold and retired from practice in 2004. While an engineer, he earned his Master of Arts degree in geography in 1995 from The University of Montana, with an emphasis in cartography, and also founded the Montana Gaelic Cultural Society in 1998. His work in this organization led to the development of a number of Irish-language immersion events, established roots for the Irish Studies program at The University of Montana, and created the *An Rí Rá* (Montana Irish Festival) in 1999. In 2004, upon his retirement from engineering, he entered the doctoral program at Louisiana State University in geography. The degree of Doctor of Philosophy will be conferred at the May 2010 Commencement. *Sin é!* “That’s it!”